NEW EDITION

# GOD WITHOUT RELIGION

## An Alternative View Of Life The Universe And Everything

Dr Michael Arnheim

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by Dr Michael Arnheim

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# PREFACE

This book is a revised version of *The God Book*, published in 2015.

The book has had a long gestation period – thirty years to be precise. It is in a sense a sequel to *Is Christianity True?* originally published in 1984, which was translated into a number of languages and created something of a stir.

Atheists reject religion, and with it a belief in any kind of God. In so doing, they are throwing the baby out with the bathwater. This book reveals the weaknesses of both atheism and of conventional organised religion without rejecting belief in God altogether. Hence the title *God Without Religion*. As far as I am aware, this is the first and only book to adopt that position.

Having studied Latin, Greek and Hebrew from an early age, I have been able to read the relevant sources written in those languages in the original. I have regrettably not been able to read the Qur'an (Koran) in its original Arabic, but there fortunately are internet sites containing a number of comparative translations of the Qur'an.

I am only sorry that my beloved mentor and colleague, Professor John Crook of St John's College, Cambridge, has not lived to see this day. He was one of the most tolerant minds I have ever come across, but he never made the mistake of equating toleration with acceptance of all views as equally valid.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my friend Jack Ward, without whose constant badgering this book would probably still not be finished. Special thanks too to my portrait-painter friend Tony Oakshett for the photograph on the dustjacket of the hardback edition; and, for her painstaking proofreading, to my friend Rosie Craig.

As I don't have a cat, I can't blame it for clambering over the keyboard. The sole responsibility for any mistakes rests on me.

For biographical information on myself, see my Wikipedia entry:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Arnheim.

3 August 2016

Dr Michael Arnheim,
London

# WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

Which is right, atheism or organised religion? Answer: Neither.

What's wrong with atheism? The intolerant radical "New Atheists" of today champion the theory of evolution by natural selection, which may help to explain small changes and variations in living things but can't explain the origin of the universe or the origin of life — because natural selection needs life to kick-start it into action. *No life, no natural selection!*

Does organised religion do any better? Not at all. It simply has too much baggage. Why does evil exist in the world? And why are the good not rewarded and the wicked punished? Organised religion has no answer except to kick these problems upstairs into the afterlife, of which there is no evidence whatsoever.

What then of the claims of religious truth? Most of the claims made for Jesus are demonstrably false. *Creed religions* like Christianity and Islam believe that they alone hold the key to truth and salvation. But *communal religions* like Hinduism, Japanese Shinto and the religions of the ancient world tend to be more tolerant. Orthodox Judaism, starting out as a communal religion, has now adopted certain features of a creed religion and become more intolerant.

But more tolerant than either radical atheism or any organised religion is deism. Unlike conventional religions, which are based on belief in a *personal* god, deism believes in an *impersonal* God who does not get involved in the day-to-day affairs of the world.

# CHAPTER ONE

## *Let the Games Begin!*

Debates about God and religion are nothing new. But the current conflict between the "New Atheists" or "Militant Atheists" and organised religion certainly gives the impression of being more acrimonious than any similar disputes in the past. The rancour is less surprising than the generally unimpressive and unpersuasive arguments on both sides.

In this chapter I will critically trawl through some of the views of protagonists on both sides.

## *Some Leading Atheist Views*

### Christopher Hitchens

One of the most militant of the New Atheists was the late Christopher Hitchens, who died in 2011. Not content to rant against religious belief — largely on the basis of self-aggrandising anecdotes masquerading as humour — Hitchens went so far as to blame religion for all the ills of the world. One of the chapters of his book *God is Not Great* is titled simply "Religion Kills", and a typical remark of his is that there is nothing in the Ten Commandments about genocide — conveniently ignoring the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill", which obviously covers mass murder as well as individual killings.

Hitchens's all too familiar litany of likes and hates is essentially a naïve "politically correct" version of the 19th century worship of "Progress" used as a stick with which to beat religion. Hitchens does not seem to have realised that his views were just as intolerant (and often also as intolerable) as those that he was attacking. He took it for granted that his values were more "enlightened" than those with which he disagreed, and he was as ready to impose them

on his supposedly benighted targets as any Victorian missionary to "darkest Africa".

**Hitchens's Misunderstanding of Northern Ireland**

So virulent was Hitchens's hatred of religion that the rationality of which he boasted was cast to the winds. A good example is his insistence on blaming the Northern Ireland conflict purely on religion, without bothering to try to understand the origin of that conflict.

Hitchens even managed to miss the point of the old Belfast joke about the man at the barricade during the Northern Ireland "troubles". On approaching the barricade the man is asked whether he's a Catholic or a Protestant. "Oh no," he replies, "I'm an atheist." "For sure, for sure," comes the retort, "but are you a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist?" Hitchens's prissy comment is, *"I think this shows how the obsession has rotted even the legendary local sense of humor."*[1] Quite the reverse, I would suggest. The joke is an example of wry Irish humour, making the point that the Northern Ireland "sectarian" conflict was *not* essentially religious at all and that *nobody* in Northern Ireland could remain neutral, regardless of their religious affiliation. The joke uses the hypothetical example of an atheist, but it could easily have been a true story, and in fact Jews in Northern Ireland were always automatically classified as Protestants, simply because they tended to regard themselves as British rather than Irish and would therefore have been Unionists rather than Irish Republican Nationalists.

Hitchens blamed the Northern Ireland "mayhem" squarely on religion, dismissing its attribution to rival nationalisms as merely "the ostensible pretext". Had he bothered to look into the origins of the Northern Ireland conflict he would have found that, though often expressed in religious terms, it was essentially a colonial conflict over power and land between settlers from mainland Britain (the "planters" or the "ascendancy"), who happened to be Protestant, and the original Irish inhabitants, who remained true to their ancestral Roman Catholic faith.

The fact that the conflict came to be *expressed* in religious terms only increased the rancour, but it was not *caused* by religious differences. The so-called "Good Friday Agreement" of 1998 largely put an end to the conflict by providing a political solution to this

essentially political problem. Before long we were treated to the remarkable spectacle of the Rev Dr Ian Paisley, a Protestant clergyman, as First Minister of Northern Ireland, laughing and joking with his Deputy, the Catholic Irish Nationalist leader and former IRA member Martin McGuinness. So well did the pair get along that they earned the nickname the "Chuckle Brothers". Yet in 1988, while Pope John Paul II was addressing the European Parliament (of which Dr Paisley was a member), Dr Paisley had loudly denounced him as "the Antichrist" and was hastily hustled out of the Parliament chamber.[2]

Hitchens's insistence on blaming the conflict on religion is not only a good example of his vehement irrational hostility against religion in general but is also a serious logical error, which I call "The Fallacy of the Kalahari Polar Bear", discussed in the next chapter.

## Richard Dawkins

If the cult of the New Atheism has a high priest it must surely be Professor Richard Dawkins. The "Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science" has as its slogan "Reason, Science, Progress" (presumably modelled on "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"!) and boldly proclaims as its "mission" — a good religious term — *"to support scientific education, critical thinking and evidence-based understanding of the natural world in the quest to overcome religious fundamentalism, superstition, intolerance and suffering."*[3]

### Religious Faith and the Smallpox Virus

Dawkins's opposition to intolerance evidently does not include his own intolerance of religion. He describes religious faith as *"one of the world's worst great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate."*[4]

After supporting Christopher Hitchens's call for Pope Benedict XVI to be arrested for "crimes against humanity", Dawkins labelled the Pope *"an enemy of humanity"* at the "Protest the Pope" rally opposing the Pope's visit to Britain in 2010.[5]

Dawkins is not interested in any attempt to reconcile science and religion. "*Certainly,*" he is reported to have said in a 1995 interview, "*I see the scientific view of the world as incompatible with religion, but that is not what is interesting about it."*[6] And: "*Are science and religion converging? No… To an honest judge, the alleged convergence between religion and science is a shallow, empty, hollow, spin-doctored sham*."[7]

### Religion and Conflict

Does Dawkins agree with Hitchens that "religion kills"? In *A Devil's Chaplain, Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science and Love*, published in 2003, Dawkins wrote:

> My point is not that religion itself is the motivation for wars, murders and terrorist attacks, but that religion is the principal label, and the most dangerous one, by which a 'they' as opposed to a 'we' can be identified at all. I am not even claiming that religion is the only label by which we

> identify the victims of our prejudice. There's also skin colour, language and social class. But often, as in Northern Ireland, these don't apply and religion is the only divisive label around.[8]

This is a slightly less extreme position than that taken by Christopher Hitchens, who, as we have seen, blamed religion squarely for the Northern Ireland "troubles". However, in *The God Delusion*, published in 2006, Dawkins moves to a position closer to that of Hitchens:

> In Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants are euphemized to 'Nationalists' and 'Loyalists' respectively. The very word 'religions' is bowdlerized to 'communities', as in 'inter-community warfare'.[9]

Later on in the same book Richard Dawkins adopts a slightly different angle , but no less hostile to religion in the end: "*Yes, yes, of course the troubles in Northern Ireland are political… There really are genuine grievances and injustices, and these seem to have little to do with religion; except that — and this is important and widely overlooked — without religion there would be no labels by which to decide whom to oppress and whom to avenge*."[10] No labels? Really? In fact, first of all, there was no shortage of labels. The labels such as "Unionists" or "Loyalists" for the one side and "Nationalists" or "Republicans" for the other were not euphemisms. Secondly, names — surnames or last names — are a pretty good indication of which group a person belongs to: Nationalists are likely to have Irish names, while Scottish names point to a Unionist background. Thirdly, Northern Ireland was a highly segregated society. So, though the two sides shared the same colour skin, they certainly did not share the same streets or neighbourhoods. In Belfast, Loyalists would be unlikely to venture into let alone live on the Falls Road, a Republican neighbourhood, while the Shankill Road was a Loyalist stronghold, and there were graffiti and sometimes barricades to remind one of this.

A look back at earlier history only confirms the point that the Irish conflict was *not* essentially a religious conflict but a political conflict *expressed* in religious terms. It is also noteworthy, for example, that at least one of the leading protagonists in this conflict belonged to the "wrong" religion — Charles Parnell (1846–1891),

the Irish Nationalist politician who led the Irish Parliamentary Party and was a Member of Parliament from 1875 until his death in 1891. Not only was Parnell a Protestant: he was also a wealthy landlord who was educated at English educational establishments, including Magdalene College, Cambridge. Parnell vigorously pursued Irish Home Rule and indeed even looked forward to full Irish independence from Britain. In a speech given during his triumphal tour of America in 1880 he is reported to have said:

> When we have undermined English misgovernment we have paved the way for Ireland to take her place amongst the nations of the earth. And let us not forget that that is the ultimate goal at which we Irishmen aim. None of us whether we be in America or in Ireland… will be satisfied until we have destroyed the last link which keeps Ireland bound to England.[11]

The use of religious labels undoubtedly intensifies the hostility inherent in conflicts, whether "inter-community" or international. But it is always necessary to look behind the labels to determine the true origin and basis of the conflict concerned. Ireland is by no means the only place where religious labels have masked a more deep-seated social or political conflict. Even where a conflict *is* essentially religious it is necessary to ask *why* the opposing sides have the religious identities that they have.

Dawkins suggests that the term "ethnic cleansing" applied to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia is *"arguably a euphemism for religious cleansing, involving Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosnians"*.[12] In fact, however, the religious differences here are expressions of national and cultural identities which go back centuries.

Religion is often a way of expressing a people's national identity and differentiating it from that of its neighbours. The staunch Catholicism of the Poles, for example, is a symbol of national and cultural identity differentiating them from the Orthodox (or, previously, Communist) Russians to the East and the Lutheran North Germans to the West. Similarly, why is there a schism between the Roman Catholic Church and what became the Eastern Orthodox Church dating from the year 1054? This "Great Schism" was ostensibly largely caused by the refusal of the eastern churches

to add the word *filioque* (“and from the Son”) to their creed. But the schism was really the result of a power struggle in the church between Rome and Constantinople, which in turn was a reflection of a linguistic, geographical and political divide. The rift has never been healed.

Yet another, and much more dangerous, religious divide is that between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Iran is the bastion of the Shia faith, claiming the adherence of no less than 89% of its population, while 9% are Sunni. Significantly, there is an ethnic difference between the two, as the ethnic Persian population itself is almost totally Shia, while Sunnis are largely drawn from the Lari, Turkomans, Baluchis or Kurds. But that has not always been the case. From the time of the Islamic conquest of Persia (637–51) until the sixteenth century the majority of the population of Iran was Sunni. The switch to Shia was the deliberate policy of Shah Ismail I of the Safavid dynasty (1487–1524), who forced his subjects to convert on pain of death. The purpose behind this policy was to give Iran a unique identity distinguishing it from its two neighbouring Sunni Turkish enemies, the Ottoman Empire to the West and the Central Asian Uzbeks to the North-East. Above all, the change to Shia enabled Ismail to establish an Islamic version of caesaropapism (sometimes misleadingly described as a theocracy), with the Shah at the head of the religion and at the same time a divinely ordained ruler — a foreshadowing of the current regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran, established in 1979. The point is that Iran owes its Shia identity not to any religious considerations but rather to political calculation.

## Stages in the Development of the Universe

Science has identified a number of phases in the development of the universe, which can be identified and labelled in several different ways. One such classification identifies seven stages, phases or thresholds:

1. "Big Bang"
2. The formation of stars and galaxies
3. Chemical evolution — the coming into existence of the chemicals that make up the earth
4. Planetary evolution — the formation of our solar system among others
5. Organic evolution — the origin of life, with all life forms descending from the same initial living organism, so that human beings are related not only to apes and mice but also to bananas and bacteria.
6. Macro-evolution — changes occurring in living organisms over very long periods known as "geological timescales"
7. Micro-evolution — changes and variations in living organisms on the timescale of human lifetimes (i.e. in under 100 years or so).

For our purposes it will be more convenient to group the stages of the development of the universe under three headings:

1. The coming into existence of the universe, including the earth [= phases (i) to (iv) of the above list];
2. The origin of life [= phase (v)]; and
3. Change and variation in living organisms [= phases (vi) and (vii)].[13]

### Big Bang?

The first of these stages is itself highly complex. Even the "Big Bang" theory itself does not claim that the coming into existence of the universe was instantaneous, but rather postulates that the Big

Bang was quickly followed by three eras known respectively as “the Planck epoch”, “the grand unification epoch” and “the electroweak epoch”. It supposedly took 9 billion years after the Big Bang for the solar system, including the earth, to be formed. The earth is believed to be about 4.54 billion years old.

Current scientific theory dates the origin of the first life on earth, that of simple cells known as prokaryotes, to 3.6 billion years ago, with fish first appearing 500 million years ago, mammals 200 million years ago, primates 60 million years ago and modern man 200,000 years ago.

**No Life, No Natural Selection**

There is a worrying tendency on Dawkins’s part to blur the distinctions between the three phases of the universe’s development and to regard evolution as the key to all three, as in the subtitle of Dawkins’s *Blind Watchmaker: Why the evidence of evolution reveals a universe without design.* When asked “What do you believe is true even though you cannot prove it?”, Dawkins replied:

> I believe that all life, all intelligence, all creativity and all ‘design’ anywhere in the universe, is the direct or indirect product of Darwinian natural selection. It follows that design comes late in the universe, after a period of Darwinian evolution. Design cannot precede evolution and therefore cannot underlie the universe.[14]

The logic of this credo is less than impressive. Dawkins here lumps together at least two of the main stages of the universe’s development — the origin of life and natural selection — and possibly even all three, if the beginning of the universe itself is included as well. His attribution of all development to Darwinian natural selection makes no sense either from a developmental or from a logical point of view. For, as even Dawkins himself admits elsewhere (see below), natural selection needed life in order to kick-start it. Darwinian evolution by natural selection could not possibly have begun before the origin of life, because it is an explanation of changes and adaptations in living species. So, no life, no natural selection. There is therefore no basis to Dawkins’s conclusion that *“Design cannot precede evolution and therefore cannot underlie the universe”*. A distinction must be drawn between Design *before* there was life on earth and Design *after* the emergence of life. The school

of “Intelligent Design” (ID) wrongly sees Design in each and every individual biological mechanism of “irreducible complexity” or “specified complexity” *after* the emergence of life on earth — each mechanism being seen as separately created by an unnamed Intelligent Designer, the thinly disguised theistic God of Christianity. Darwinian natural selection has a clear evidential advantage over this type of Design theory relating to the period *after* the origin of life on earth. But Design *before* the existence of life on earth is a completely different matter, to which evolution and natural selection have and can have no relevance whatsoever, because evolution cannot start by itself but needs life to initiate it.

The three stages in the development of the universe are very different, not least because the evidence for the first two is extremely meagre. Darwinian theory is primarily concerned with the third of these stages and has very little to say about the first two. Yet it is precisely the first two stages that are most relevant to the question of the existence or non-existence of God or of Design, and it is here, as we shall see, that belief in an impersonal God makes the most sense, coupled with acceptance of evolution after life on earth has begun.

## The Origin of Life

Life is based on the cell, which in Darwin's day was assumed to be a fairly simple blob of protoplasm. Cell biology has since revealed a much more complex picture:

> Although the tiniest bacterial cells are incredibly small, weighing less than 10–12 grams, each is in effect a veritable micro-miniaturized factory containing thousands of exquisitely designed pieces of intricate molecular machinery, made up altogether of a hundred thousand million atoms, far more complicated than any machinery built by man and absolutely without parallel in the non-living world.[15]

Here is Dawkins's less than impressive attempt to answer the question about the origin of life put to him in an (undated) interview on America's Public Broadcasting Service:

> QUESTION: What do you say to the argument that some people are raising now that it's all very well for evolution to be the mechanism once you have a self-replicating structure like DNA — but how do you get that complex structure in the first place? Maybe DNA is the work of God?
>
> MR. DAWKINS: It's a different argument to say how did the whole process start — how do we begin with the origin of life? The origin of life — the key process in the origin of life was the arising of a self-replicating molecule. This was a very simple thing compared with what it's given rise to. By far the majority of the work in producing the elegant complexity of life is done after the origin of life, during the process of evolution. There does remain the very first step — I don't think it's necessarily a bigger step than several of the subsequent steps, but it is a step. And it's a step which we don't fully understand — mainly because it happened such a long time ago, and under conditions when the Earth was very different. And so it's not necessarily possible to simulate again the chemical conditions of the origin of life. There are various theories for how it might have happened.

> None of them is yet fully convincing. It may be that none of them ever will be, because it may be that we shall never know fully what the conditions were. But I don't find it at all a deeply mysterious step.[16]

Dawkins does at least admit that the origin of life is not "fully" understood, but at the same time tries to downgrade its importance and its degree of complexity compared with the evolution that occurred afterwards. In particular, he pooh-poohs the suggestion that the origin of life is "at all a deeply mysterious step" — contrary to Darwin, who specifically referred to it as a "mystery".

Dawkins pointedly ignores his interlocutor's question: "Maybe DNA is the work of God?" But what is the answer? Dawkins tries to tackle this in his book titled *The Blind Watchmaker*. Here is what he says:

> To explain the origin of the DNA/protein machine by invoking a supernatural Designer is to explain precisely nothing, for it leaves unexplained the origin of the Designer. You have to say something like 'God was always there', and if you allow yourself that kind of lazy way out, you might as well just say 'DNA was always there', or 'Life was always there', and be done with it.[17]

And:

> Maybe, it is argued, the Creator does not control the day-to-day succession of evolutionary events; maybe he did not frame the tiger and the lamb, maybe he did not make a tree, but he *did* set up the original machinery of replication and replicator power, the original machinery of DNA and protein that made cumulative selection, and hence all of evolution, possible.[18]

Dawkins's comment is: *"This is a transparently feeble argument, indeed it is obviously self-defeating."*[19] Who made God? Where did God come from? Or: Has God always existed? The atheist objection is that if God created the universe, who created God? Judging by the number of times that Dawkins repeats this same point in *The God Delusion*, one must assume that he sees this as a killer argument against the existence of God — and at first sight it is a strong argument.

It reminds me of one of my favourite lines from the movies. In *Superman* (1978), the superhero comes to Lois Lane's rescue by grabbing her as she is falling out of a burning plane in a mid-air accident, with the reassuring words: *"Easy, miss, I've got you."* Lois Lane's anguished response is: *"You've got me? Who's got you?"*[20]

Dawkins was not the first person to pose the question of the origin of God. The Prophet Mohammed himself was aware of this argument, and is reputed (by Sahih Al-Bukhari, a ninth century Persian Muslim scholar) to have remarked: *"A day will certainly come when some people will sit with their legs crossed and ask: 'If God created everything, who created God?'"* The answer given is: *"God does not need causes and effects to create; rather, we need them to understand what He has created."*[21]

In effect, this conundrum is unanswerable except by faith, and there is no relevant evidence one way or the other. But, as we shall see, there is no more evidence in favour of Dawkins's alternative answer.

**"Cumulative Selection"**

Dawkins's alternative is something that he calls "cumulative selection": *"Cumulative selection is the key to all our modern explanations of life."*[22] But Dawkins does go on to admit that "cumulative selection" could not start operating by itself — it needed to be kick-started by something else: *"Cumulative selection is the key but it had to get started, and we cannot escape the need to postulate a single-step chance event in the origin of cumulative selection itself."*[23] Amazingly, Dawkins goes even further by adding: *"And that vital first step was a difficult one…"*[24] Even more amazingly, Dawkins goes on to assert that a certain amount of "luck" (or chance) should be assumed as necessary for the origin of life on earth.

So "cumulative selection" turns out to have no relevance at all to the question of the origin of life. It merely adds another completely made-up and redundant step between the origin of life and evolution by natural selection. Why did Dawkins add this completely unnecessary and unproven step? Presumably because the jump from a chance event starting life and the blind but non-random step-by-step operation of natural selection seemed just too great.

## Weasel Words

But what is "cumulative selection" anyway? It is based on a variation of the well-known "infinite monkey theorem" positing that *"a monkey bashing away at random on a typewriter could produce all the works of Shakespeare"*.[25] Even to produce a single line from Hamlet, *"Methinks it is like a weasel"*, would take a monkey *"more than a million million million times as long as the universe has so far existed"*.[26] Dawkins therefore modified the experiment so that at each attempt the simulated monkey (actually a computer program) chooses the variant that most closely resembles the target phrase.

This guided selection process is what Dawkins means by "cumulative selection", and Dawkins is at least honest enough to admit in a throwaway remark that his computer model of "cumulative selection" "is strictly a model of *artificial selection*, not natural selection".[27] Artificial selection, now generally called selective breeding, is the oldest kind of selection of all, namely the process by which animal breeders or farmers breed animals or plants to obtain particular characteristics — for example the enormous bulk of a St Bernard or the diminutive size of a King Charles Spaniel. But the point about artificial selection or selective breeding is that it is exactly the opposite of what natural selection is supposed to be. *It is a designed process carefully guided by a controlling mind.* To suggest that it would operate automatically when not simulated by a computer is just wishful thinking.

"Cumulative selection" is therefore not undirected and, above all, is concerned only with variations that occur *after* life has begun. It has no relevance whatsoever to the question of how life began. And it is an extra step gratuitously added to the process without any evidence whatsoever that it actually exists unless added in deliberately by conscious effort. So it is no better than a belief that life was the work of a supernatural Designer. Dawkins's ramblings about "cumulative selection" are *weasel* words indeed — or, to be more precise, merely a red herring.

## Occam's Razor

Dawkins expresses agreement with the theologian and Christian apologist Richard Swinburne in preferring *"the simplest hypothesis that fits the facts"*.[28] This conforms to a belief in the theory of Occam's Razor, which is discussed in Chapter 2.

However, because it adds an extra step to the process, "cumulative selection" is not simpler but actually more complex than belief that life was brought into being by a supernatural Designer. So Dawkins's preference for a "simple" solution does not help him here.

But Dawkins is so intent on rejecting design at every point that he even goes so far as to claim that the "multiverse" theory of an infinite number of universes is simple compared to "the God hypothesis":

> The multiverse, for all that it is extravagant, is simple… The multiverse may seem extravagant in sheer number of universes. But if each one of those universes is simple in its fundamental laws, we are still not postulating anything highly improbable. The very opposite has to be said of any kind of intelligence.[29]

The multiverse theory postulates that, with an infinite number of universes in existence, it was inevitable that life would exist in at least some of them. So a Designer is not needed to explain life on earth, which exists simply because this planet happens to allow life to exist.

Is this a "simple" explanation for life on earth? No. It is not an explanation at all, because:

- The whole idea of infinite universes is pure speculation — even more so than the idea of a supernatural Designer.
- If the idea of a supernatural Designer or God begs the question "Who made God?", so the idea of an infinity of universes begs the question: "How did all these universes come into existence?" And "What kick-started life in those universes that support life?"
- So it is hard to regard a theory of infinite universes as a simpler explanation of the origin of life than the theory of a supernatural Designer.
- Dawkins's argument is also an example of circular reasoning: life on earth exists because this planet allows life on earth to exist!

**Rival Theories of the Origin of Life**

So much for Dawkins's fetish about simplicity. It is very important to recognise just how different and how much more difficult the question of the origin of life is than the question of how variations in life forms occur *after* life has commenced. Here are some of the many theories that attempt to explain the origin of life:

- Several explanations of the jump from the inanimate to the living try to reduce it from a jump to a step-by-step process, which only begs the question of what caused this development. One theory of this kind is the so-called Clay Theory put forward by A. Graham Cairns-Smith of the University of Glasgow in 1985. Another is the recent theory put forward by Jeremy England of MIT: *"You start with a random clump of atoms, and if you shine light on it for long enough, it should not be so surprising that you get a plant."*[30] As far as I am aware, there is no experimental evidence for this theory.
- "Abiogenesis" or "biopoiesis", theories of how life arose from inorganic matter by natural processes, likewise reduce the change from non-living to living matter to a question- begging gradual process.[31]
- The "primordial soup" theory, which claimed that passing an electric current through the right mixture of water and gases would produce life. The well-known Miller-Urey experiment of 1952 tried this, but to no effect.[32]
- Panspermia, the theory that life on earth came from somewhere else in the universe, essentially kicks the problem upstairs in much the same way as religion kicks the problem of reward and punishment into the afterlife. The panspermia theory also begs the question of how life in that other galaxy arose in the first place.[33]

The simplest explanation of the origin of life is to attribute it to a supernatural super-intelligent Designer, an impersonal God who is not interested in the day-to-day affairs of the world, does not answer prayers and does not dole out rewards and punishments — an impersonal deistic God, as distinct from the personal theistic God of conventional religion. As we shall see later on in this chapter, belief in an impersonal deistic God as the creator of life on earth is compatible with Darwinian evolution by natural selection by

incremental steps *after* the creation of life — much more compatible than theism is with evolution by natural selection. Interestingly enough, as Professor John Lennox, the mathematician and Christian apologist, relates: in a debate with him in Oxford in October 2008 Dawkins publicly admitted *"that a case could be made for a deistic god*".[34]

Does atheism, theism or deism offer the most credible explanation for the origin of the universe itself? I deal with this in the next section of the present chapter.

That still leaves the question of the explanation of evolution, of the mechanisms for change and variation in living organisms, on which see Chapter 3.

# Stephen Hawking

## Hawking's Unintentional Joke

In his book *The Grand Design*, Professor Stephen Hawking, one of the best-known modern scientists, confidently asserts:

> Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going.[35]

Is this a joke? Everything here appears to hinge on the law of gravity, which apparently existed before the universe. But how can the law of gravity operate in a vacuum? Doesn't gravity need matter to work? Hawking's proposition will simply not stand up to logical scrutiny.

Even Hawking refers to gravity as a "law", but whose law? Presumably a law of nature. But, as Darwin recognised, a universe governed by "fixed laws" is a universe based on "Design". (See the discussion of Occam's Razor in Chapter 2.) Whether the intelligent designer is labelled "God", "the Creator", "the Designer", "the One" or "Nature" makes no difference. Which brings us back to deism.

## The 14-Billion-Year Wait

In a recent talk Hawking threw out this supposedly witty (intentionally so, this time) remark: *"What was God doing before the divine creation? Was he preparing hell for people who asked such questions?"*[36] In a 2012 debate with Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Dawkins similarly posed the rhetorical question: *"If there was a God, why would he have waited 14 billion years before man came along?"* Sacks did not try to counter this, but contented himself with the remark, *"Because that's how long it took."*[37]

## Misconceived Point

The point made by Dawkins and Hawking is a serious one, but completely misconceived. The rather comical picture of God

"waiting" for 14 billion years presupposes that if there is a God he must be a personal God. This is a totally anthropomorphic view of God — of a God created in the image of man, with or without a long flowing white beard. Dawkins and Hawking are making the point that once the existence of a *personal* God is shown to be improbable — which is not difficult to do — that means that God does not exist at all. However, there is a completely different type of God, an *impersonal* deist God, creator or designer of the universe who is *not* involved in the day-to-day affairs of the world, who is *not* receptive to prayer, who does *not* work miracles, and for whom the concept of 14 billion years would probably have no meaning. (For more on this see Chapter 3.) Setting up a *personal* God as the only type of God, as Dawkins and Hawking do here, and then knocking it down again like an Aunt Sally at a fairground is an example of the Straw Man Fallacy.

Religion offers no answer to the question of how God came into existence. Instead, God is always spoken of as "eternal". But, if this is a problem with religion, it is no less a problem with the Big Bang "something from nothing" theory.

**Hoyle's Party Girl**

The term "Big Bang" was actually coined not by a proponent of that theory but by the distinguished Cambridge astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle (1915–2001), who was implacably opposed to it. Hoyle believed in a "steady-state" universe with no beginning and no end. He rejected as pseudoscience the belief that the universe had a beginning, which he labelled the "Big Bang" theory and compared it to "a party girl jumping out of a cake".[38]

The point is that at the beginning of time there was no "party" and no "cake" for the girl (i.e. matter) to jump out of. The Big Bang theory is a rejection of the ancient philosophical idea that "nothing comes from nothing" (or, in Latin, *ex nihilo nihil fit*) first expressed by the Greek philosopher Parmenides 2,500 years ago. This theory is still with us today in the form of scientific laws. There is the law of the conservation of mass propounded by Antoine Lavoisier in 1785, which states that "matter is neither created nor destroyed", and the law of the conservation of energy, now called the First Law of Thermodynamics, which states that "energy is neither created nor destroyed". On the basis of Einstein's Theory of Relativity these

two laws were merged into the Law of the Conservation of Mass-Energy, which holds that "the total amount of mass and energy in the universe is constant".[39]

Hoyle, who was actually an atheist, also wrote: "*I do not believe that any scientist who examined the evidence would fail to draw the inference that the laws of nuclear physics have been deliberately designed with regard to the consequences they produce inside the stars*."[40] In other words, the laws of nuclear physics (and presumably therefore all other scientific laws as well) are the product of conscious design.

**Hawking's Curious Logic**

Stephen Hawking rejects this out of hand:

> At the time no one knew enough nuclear physics to understand the magnitude of the serendipity that resulted in these exact physical laws. But in investigating the validity of the strong anthropic principle, in recent years physicists began asking themselves what the universe would have been like if the laws of nature were different… Change those rules of our universe just a bit, and the conditions for our existence disappear![41]

In other words, according to Hawking, it is now known that the laws of nuclear physics are so fine-tuned that the slightest change in those laws would have prevented the coming into existence of human life on earth. That is surely an argument *in favour* of design, not against it! For, the more complex and precise the laws of nuclear physics had to be in order to support human life, the less likely it is that it would have come about by pure chance, or serendipity.

It is worth noting that the "strong anthropic principle" is rejected by many scientists. A version of it by leading proponents of this theory is to the effect that *"The Universe must have those properties which allow life to develop within it at some stage of its history."*[42] This would appear to be tautologous, because if the universe did not allow life to exist we would not be here to discuss it.

**Aren't the Laws of Nature God's Laws?**

In his unintentionally comical belief in the primacy of the law of

gravity Stephen Hawking does not even try to explain how the law of gravity came about in the first place. If the law of gravity arose out of nothing, that is hardly different from saying that the law of gravity was made by God. In the same way, all natural laws are God's laws: Boyle's law is God's law, the Mendelian laws of inheritance are God's laws, the laws of Thermodynamics are God's laws, and so are all other scientific laws, with the exception of tongue-in-cheek "laws" such as Parkinson's law, Murphy's law or Sod's law.

Hawking's purported "explanation" of the something-from-nothing "spontaneous creation" of the universe rests on the law of gravity. But that begs the question: where did the law of gravity come from? It is just one of the myriad laws of nature, which Einstein in his genuine humility attributed to (an impersonal) God.

**Pope and Monkey**

In 1951, soon after the Big Bang theory was first propounded, Pope Pius XII, who was not exactly a liberal theologian, embraced it enthusiastically as proof that the universe had a definite beginning, which chimed in with the Catholic concept of creation.

Pius XII of course believed in a personal God, but the Big Bang itself could equally, and indeed more easily, be identified with an impersonal God. The atheists' constant rail against that is that sticking the label "God" on the Big Bang is completely superfluous, as it does not add anything but is only question-begging. The rejoinder is that the alternative of something-from-nothing is a non-explanation as well and is equally question-begging: what was it that enabled something to come out of nothing? The idea of the Big Bang rests on the so-called "cosmological principle", which is an unproven axiom embodying the working assumption or premise that the distribution of matter in the universe is "homogeneous and isotropic" when viewed on a large enough scale. Sir Karl Popper (1902–94), the famous philosopher of science, criticised the cosmological principle on the ground that it makes "our lack of knowledge a principle of knowing something". Popper summed up his attitude to Big Bang as follows:

> I once was an enthusiastic admirer of Big Bang. I am *now* a disgusted opponent. As to the 'steady state' theory, it is insufficiently developed, and Ryle's criticism insufficiently

discussed. And the 'cosmological principles' were, I fear, dogmas that should not have been proposed.[43]

**Genesis and Science**

Once creation is attributed to God — whether personal or impersonal — the course of creation after that follows a similar pattern in the Bible to that propounded by science. In both accounts the universe appears first, then the earth, then water, followed by plants, fishes, birds, terrestrial animals, then mammals and finally man.

The two big differences between the scientific and Biblical accounts are:

- The time-span involved; and, above all
- The issue of human descent from apes.

Fundamentalist Christians or Jews who take the Biblical account literally and believe that the world really was created in six days cannot find any evidence for that belief in fact. And the same applies to the belief that flows from it that man has existed for less than six thousand years (as reflected in the Hebrew calendar, in which 2015–2016 becomes the year 5776). There is just too much physical evidence that the earth is a lot older than that — several billion years older — and that earliest form of man (the genus *Homo*) probably appeared more than two million years ago.

Less extreme religious people are prepared to accept that the biblical account is mythical and is not intended to be arithmetically correct. What is remarkable, though, is that the stages of creation as described in the Book of Genesis correspond so remarkably with the stages propounded by science.

Does this mean that the Bible was written by God, as fundamentalists believe? No, whoever wrote the Book of Genesis was clearly human — and the account of creation in that book bears a certain family resemblance to creation myths from other cultures, especially those from Mesopotamia. Although the Book of Genesis itself was written about 2,500 years ago, it probably draws on a creation tradition going back a lot further.

Evolutionists' belief in human descent from apes — or "monkeys" as some of its detractors refer to it — has caused much more of a

rift with creationists than any disagreements about chronology. But evolution does not claim that man is “descended” from “modern” apes or monkeys. It claims rather that man shares common ancestors with modern apes. Genesis of course says nothing about this, but by identifying a similar chronology of the stages of life forms to that posited by evolutionists, it leaves ample room for natural selection. In other words, there is no intrinsic conflict between religion and science on creation. But is the Creator of the universe the personal theistic God of conventional religion or the impersonal God of deism? We shall discuss this a bit later in the chapter.

# *Some Leading Religious Views*

## Intelligent Design

The term "intelligent design" is used in several different senses, but in general the argument from design, the argument from intelligent design, or the teleological argument, as it may also be termed, may be summarised as a syllogism: *Wherever complex design exists, there must have been a designer; nature is complex; therefore nature must have had an intelligent designer.* The argument was first presented in this form by the Roman Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) in the "fifth proof" of the existence of God in his *Quinque Viae* ("Five Ways"). The argument was more fully developed by William Paley in his *Natural Theology*, published in 1802, which greatly impressed the young Charles Darwin before he developed his theory of evolution by natural selection.

Paley is best known for his "Watchmaker Analogy", based on the supposition that he had found a watch lying on the ground:

> This mechanism being observed, the inference we think is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker: that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer: who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.[44]

Paley compared the watch to features in nature with the same appearance of deliberate design, such as the human and animal eye, animals' muscles, the stomach, the spine and the shoulder joint.

### "Intelligent Design (ID)"

The "Intelligent Design" (ID) movement, which came into existence in 1984, put forward an updated version of Paley's theory, notably in a school textbook titled *Of Pandas and People: The Central Question of Biological Origins* by Percival Davis and Dean H. Kenyon, published in 1989. Although the ID movement tends to avoid religious language and does not identify the "Intelligent Designer"

with the Christian God or any other specific agent, their writings have been attacked as a thinly veiled version of creationism, or the belief that the universe and living organisms originate "from specific acts of divine creation".[45] Like creationism, ID is based on the idea of repeated miraculous interventions in nature.

The ID movement has attempted to place their ideas on a scientific footing by introducing such concepts as "irreducible complexity" and "specified complexity". "Irreducible complexity" was first posited by the biochemist Michael Behe in his book *Darwin's Black Box* published in 1996. Using the analogy of a mousetrap, Behe identified the eye and other biological mechanisms as examples of "irreducible complexity". However, biologists have offered evolutionary explanations for all Behe's examples.[46]

"Specified complexity", a term borrowed from information theory, was used by the mathematician, philosopher and theologian William A. Dembski to refer to anything with a less than 1 in $10^{150}$ chance of occurring by natural chance. ID protagonists argue that when something is both complex and "specified", then it can be inferred that it was consciously designed by an intelligent agent rather than being the result of natural selection. This idea has met with a lot of opposition in the scientific community, who, among other arguments, assert that Dembski's theory is tautologous: in accordance with Dembski's own definition complex specified information cannot occur naturally by definition.[47] Dembski explains his theory like this:

> A single letter of the alphabet is specified without being complex. A long sentence of random letters is complex without being specified. A Shakespearean sonnet is both complex and specified.[48]

However, Dembski has come out quite openly as an advocate of Christianity, which has not assisted his attempt to seek scientific credentials for his theory:

> Christ is indispensable to any scientific theory, even if its practitioners don't have a clue about him. The pragmatics of a scientific theory can, to be sure, be pursued without recourse to Christ. But the conceptual soundness of the theory can in the end only be located in Christ. And: I believe God created the world for a purpose. The Designer

of intelligent design is, ultimately, the Christian God.[49]

It is apparent from this that Dembski's argument is not really evidence-based but has a theological starting point.

**The God of the Genome**

One of the fiercest critics of ID is the committed Christian, Dr Francis Collins, the former head of the Human Genome Project, who is on record as claiming that *"The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshipped in the cathedral and in the laboratory."*[50] This remark could have been made by a proponent of ID. But Collins's position is quite different. He labels his theory "theistic evolution" or "BioLogos", which he summarises as the belief that *"evolution is real, but that it was set in motion by God."*[51] An alternative definition of this theory is as follows: *"Theistic evolution, which accepts that evolution occurred as biologists describe it, but under the direction of God."*[52]

Francis Collins lists the six premises of theistic evolution in his book *The Language of God*:

1. The universe came into being out of nothingness, approximately 14 billion years ago.
2. Despite massive improbabilities, the properties of the universe appear to have been precisely tuned for life.
3. While the precise mechanism of the origin of life on earth remains *unknown, once life arose, the process of evolution and natural* selection permitted the development of biological diversity and complexity over very long periods of time.
4. Once evolution got under way, no special supernatural intervention was required.
5. Humans are part of this process, sharing a common ancestor with the great apes.
6. *But humans are also unique in ways that defy evolutionary explanation and point to our spiritual nature. This includes the existence of the Moral Law (the knowledge of right and wrong) and the search for God that characterizes all human cultures throughout our history*.[53]

This is an attempt to reconcile evolution with a belief in a

theistic God. Let us look at the propositions one by one:

1. This statement is equally compatible with divine creation of the universe and with the "Big Bang" theory, which was even accepted by Pope Pius XII. The 14-billion-year timespan is not a problem except for "Young Earth Creationists" who take the Genesis account literally.
2. As we have already seen, the origin of life is a serious problem for science. There is a welter of theories with very little evidence to back them up. Evolution starts only *after* life has begun, so cannot help here. So God can easily step into the breach as the creator of life.
3. This is the biggest distinction between "Theistic Evolution" and ID, as the latter does not accept evolution by natural selection but instead posits repeated deliberate miraculous interventions by the Designer in nature.
4. This is another major concession to evolutionists, who of course hold that natural selection is, in Dawkins's words, a *"blind, unconscious, automatic process"*.[54]
5. This too is a concession to the theory of evolution, which actually goes even further, tracing all life, whether man, mouse, mollusc or mango, from a common ancestor.
6. This last premise amounts to a huge leap from evidence-based propositions to one based purely on faith. The result is that the six premises do not form a united whole.

Francis Collins makes an even greater leap of faith in what may be regarded as his seventh premise:

> Miracles do not pose an irreconcilable conflict for the believer who trusts in science as a means to investigate the natural world, and who sees that the natural world is ruled by laws. If, like me, you admit that there might exist something or someone outside of nature, then there's no logical reason why that force could not on rare occasions stage an invasion. On the other hand, in order for the world to avoid descending into chaos, miracles must be very uncommon.[55]

Belief in miracles is not only unscientific but in a real sense anti-

scientific, because there has never been any reliable evidence of them. (See more on this in Chapter 3.)

When interviewed by Nigel Bovey, after positing God's creation of "the moral law" Francis Collins admitted yet another leap of faith:

> God also knew that these creatures [i.e. human beings] would ultimately choose to disobey the moral law, and thus the fall would occur. His provision for this would be to send his Son, Jesus, to live, die and be raised for our salvation.[56]

But Francis Collins does not stop there:

> Jesus claimed not only to know God but also to be God and to forgive sins, and he died on the cross in a way that took me a long time to understand.[57]

This goes further even than the Christian scriptures, from which Jesus does *not* appear to have claimed that he was God: that is a claim made well over a century after his death. The New Testament nowhere mentions the word "Trinity" nor explicitly teaches belief in a three-in-one God. The earliest defence of the doctrine of the Trinity is to be found in the writings of the church father Tertullian (160–c.225).

In view of all these points, it is clear that "Theistic Evolution" is completely untenable as a theory, let alone in terms of evidence. Evolution and theism (i.e. belief in a personal God) simply do not gel.

**Deistic Evolution**

However, as we have already seen, an alternative to "Theistic Evolution" that *is* quite feasible and, I would suggest, greatly preferable to atheism and theism alike, is *Deistic Evolution*, or a belief in a combination of evolution with an impersonal God.

The combination of deism with evolution also neatly fits in with the divide between the three main stages of the earth's development:

1. *The coming into existence of the universe, including the earth*: as we have seen, science now favours the "Big Bang" theory, which fits in very well with belief in an impersonal deistic God.

2. *The origin of life*: this is a major problem for science, which to date has no adequate explanation for it. Postulating life as the creation of God is no harder to accept than the weird and wonderful theories science has come up with. No satisfactory step-by-step explanation has been offered by science, and yet the development from inanimate matter to a single cell is a major leap. An impersonal God is preferable to a personal God chiefly because of stage three:
3. *Change and variation in living organisms*: the God who created life also put in place a whole framework of "fixed laws" or "designed laws", as Darwin called them, to regulate the universe, including evolution by natural selection as a mechanism for guiding the development of living organisms. To postulate a theistic personal God in this role would make no sense, because there is too much of a disconnect between evidence-based evolution and totally unproven beliefs about God, and we would also have to decide which of the different religions' Gods this was, with the necessary implication of the supremacy of that particular religion — which just does not blend with the idea of natural selection.

## Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

### Sacks's Argument

Lord Sacks, the former British chief rabbi, has often been invited by the media to be the voice of religion in debates with assorted atheist scientists. Sacks takes the view that religion and science are complementary, in the sense that each *needs* the other. In his book *The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning,* Sacks claims to have put forward an argument to show that *"we need both religion and science… Both are necessary, but they are very different."*[58] But this argument will not stand up to scrutiny.

Here's a summary of some of Sacks's main positions.

### Sacks's Mantra

Sacks believes that religion and science need each other: "*Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean.*"[59] This oft-repeated mantra has a good ring to it, but that ring is pretty hollow. For one thing, different religions believe in different meanings. Is this mantra intended to apply to all religions? Yet the amount of agreement about "meaning" (whatever that means) between the different religions — or even between different branches of the same religion — is not very great.

### Sacks's "Three Great Questions"

Another of Sacks's repeated claims is that religion "*answers the three great questions that any reflective human being will ask: Who am I? (the question of identity), Why am I here? (the question of purpose), and, How then shall I live? (the question of ethics and meaning)*".[60]

Sacks does not provide answers to these "great questions". To take just the last of these questions, why should anyone allow their religion to dictate to them how to live? And orthodox Judaism identifies no fewer than 613 laws in the Torah (the Pentateuch, or Five Books of Moses) alone, including a lot of less than rational rules governing the Jewish Sabbath and ritual. (See Chapter 5.)

### Sacks's "Noblest Hypothesis"

Under the heading “I Believe”, here is what Sacks calls his “credo”: “*I believe that the idea that the universe was created in love by the God of love who asks us to create in love is the noblest hypothesis ever to have lifted the human mind*.”[61] But why should we accept this “noblest hypothesis”? As there is no evidence for it, the answer must be purely by a leap of faith. It’s not even at all clear what “love” is supposed to mean in this context. At the very least one would expect it to include religious toleration. Yet, orthodox Judaism has proved less than tolerant even of certain other Jewish denominations. (See Chapter 5.)

### “The Bible isn’t interested in how the universe came into being”

In an article in *The Times* of 3 September 2010 Sacks opined: “*The Bible simply isn’t interested in how the universe came into being. It devotes a mere 34 verses to the subject. It takes fifteen times as much space to describing how the Israelites constructed a sanctuary in the desert.*”[62] A mere 34 verses, indeed — but what verses! They are among the best-known and most quoted Biblical verses. Above all, these 34 verses contain some remarkable parallels with the scientific account — which would have given Sacks an opportunity to build a bridge between science and religion, which he claims to be keen to do.[63]

The account of creation in Genesis provides a much better link between religion and science than anything that Sacks has to offer on the subject. The order of creation according to Genesis is: the universe, the earth, the seas, plants, fishes, birds, terrestrial animals, and finally man — very much the same order as that proposed by science. Of course, Genesis compresses the whole operation into seven days, but that must surely be taken as poetic licence. One day might as well be equivalent to 2 billion years, thus providing the 14 billion years posited by Dawkins and other scientists for the emergence of man! But that is not the point. The point is that the creation story in Genesis can easily be reconciled with the latest scientific theory of a Big Bang followed by the existence of life and then evolution by natural selection.

This convergence is all the more remarkable because until recently the scientific orthodoxy was that the universe had no beginning because it had always existed. This comes out clearly

from a 1959 survey of leading American scientists, one of the questions in which was: *"What is your estimate of the age of the universe?"* Two-thirds of the scientists surveyed replied *"there is no age — the universe is eternal"*.

Even Albert Einstein, whose own theories indicated that the universe should be expanding, was reluctant to believe the universe was not eternal and static. Finally, American astronomer Edwin Hubble convinced Einstein to travel to Pasadena and examine the proof directly, following which Einstein admitted that Hubble's observations 'made it appear likely that the general structure of the universe is not static'.[64]

**Sacks's Alternative Interpretation**

Sacks does not discuss any of the striking similarities between Genesis and evolution. Instead, he makes a less than persuasive point about evolution based on a far-fetched interpretation of one word in Genesis 2:3. The word occurs right at the end of the Biblical account of creation. A literal translation of the Hebrew reads as follows: *"And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because on it God rested from all the work that he created to do."* The words "that he created to do" read rather awkwardly. The word *la'asot*, meaning "to do" or "to make" seems superfluous. Sacks quotes two medieval Jewish commentators who suggested that the last words of the verse mean *"[he had created it] in such a way that it would continue to create itself*".[65]

This is pretty far-fetched, but Sacks's suggested translation stretches the text even further: *"Without stretching the text too far*", suggests Sacks, *"we might say that la'asot means, quite simply, 'to evolve'. Evolution would then be hinted at in the very last word of the Genesis creation story."*[66]

On the basis of this translation, suggests Sacks, evolution would be hinted at in Genesis. But why is it necessary to clutch at a "hint" of evolution from one word when there is a loud shout of evolution from 34 magnificent verses? This kind of reasoning can hardly serve the purposes of either science or religion, or of any reconciliation between them.

**Sacks's Reliance on Brain Hemisphere Theory**

Science, opines Sacks, "*is a predominantly left-brain activity*",

while religion "*is associated with the right hemisphere*".[67] In support of this formulation, Sacks relies quite heavily on the book by Dr Iain McGilchrist titled *The Master and his Emissary*.[68] McGilchrist portrays western history as a battle between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, the left brain being more "rational" and the right brain more "intuitive". This view of history goes well beyond the evidence and even beyond the theory on which it is based. As a reviewer in *The Economist* put it, McGilchrist's application of his theory to the whole sweep of western culture "*has plainly become untethered from its moorings in brain science*".[69]

Rabbi Sacks uses this less than secure theoretical foundation to construct a hypothesis that simply collapses under the weight of its own improbability. In brief, he claims that religion, and particularly Judaism, is the product of right-brain thinking, which is *"integrative and holistic",* while science arises out of left-brain thinking, which is *"linear, analytical, atomistic and mechanical"*.[70] Besides the fact that the validity of this left–right dichotomy has largely been rejected by neuroscience, Sacks's hypothesis is further weakened by a less than impressive argument.

**Right-brain vs. Left-brain**

Sacks's argument goes something like this (*with Sacks's points paraphrased in italics*):

> Sacks: *The Hebrew alphabet has no vowels, only consonants, so individual words are difficult to read in isolation*.[71]
>
> Sacks: *Because they have no vowels, Hebrew words can't be read in isolation but only in context — a right-brain function. So the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish religion look at the broad picture (a right-brain approach) rather than the literal minutiae (which would be a left-brain approach)*.[72]

To prove his point Sacks gives the example of the opening words of the Tractate Berakhot of the Mishnah, a rabbinic Jewish code of laws. The book opens with the question: "From what time does one recite the Shema [a central Jewish prayer] in the evening?"[73]

Three rabbis each give a different answer. Sacks cites the absence of any general principles about prayer or any law as proof that this is right-brain thinking. But doesn't it actually prove exactly the opposite? What we have here are three rabbinic views on a trivial

subject, namely at what time a particular prayer must be recited. The *true* right-brain approach (by Sacks's own definition of right-brain thinking as "integrative" or "holistic") would surely put the whole thing in perspective and ask the bigger question, "Why is it necessary to have a ruling at all on the precise time when a particular prayer has to be said?" Unfortunately, the narrow, pedantic approach evidenced in Sacks's selected text is all too typical of rabbinic law in general. (See Chapter 5.)

> Sacks: *As the left brain needs the right brain, so science and religion complement each other and each needs the other*.[74] I agree that science and religion are not incompatible — though not for any of the reasons advanced by Sacks. (See above on the convergence between Genesis and evolution.) But the fact that science and religion *can* coexist quite peacefully does not mean that they *must*. Here one has to agree with Dawkins when he dismisses Sacks's repeated claim that religion answers what Sacks calls *"The question of purpose, Why am I here?"*[75] If there is no God, says Dawkins, the question of purpose is "illegitimate": it simply falls away.[76]

One cannot just take it for granted that the presence of life on earth or even human life *does* have a purpose.

# *Review of Chapter One*

- It's wrong to blame religion for all the evils in the world, as Christopher Hitchens does in his remark, "Religion kills".
- Political or economic conflicts may use religious labels, but that doesn't necessarily make them religious conflicts. The Northern Ireland "troubles" are a case in point. On the conflict with "Islam" see Chapter 7, and see Chapter 8 for my general conclusion on this important issue.
- The prevailing scientific model has identified three main stages (condensed from seven) in the development of the universe: (i) The coming into existence of the universe; (ii) The origin of life on earth; and (iii) Evolution by natural selection.
- It's important not to lump these three stages together, as appears to be done in the subtitle of Dawkins's *Blind Watchmaker: Why the evidence of evolution reveals a universe without design.*
- Life is needed to kick-start natural selection. So, no life, no natural selection.
- But how did life on earth begin? None of the rival theories of the origin of life has much to commend it.
- The simplest explanation for the origin of life is to attribute it to a super-intelligent Designer, an impersonal deistic God, as distinct from the personal theistic God of conventional religion.
- But, if God (even an impersonal God) made life, who made God? This is a constant atheist jibe. But the alternative explanations for the origin of life are equally question-begging.
- Stephen Hawking's assertion that *"Because there is a law of gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing"* presumes that the law of gravity existed before the universe —

which will not stand up to logical scrutiny.

- Dawkins's rhetorical question, "*If there was a God, why would he have waited 14 billion years before man came along?"* is misconceived in relation to an impersonal God, for whom the concept of 14 billion years would probably have no meaning.
- As an explanation for the origin of the universe, the "Big Bang" is not incompatible with belief in God. Though the Big Bang was enthusiastically embraced by Pope Pius XII, it is more compatible with an impersonal God than with a personal God.
- The atheists object that sticking the label "God" on the Big Bang is question-begging. But the whole idea of a "Big Bang" is itself a question-begging something-from-nothing theory — and the "cosmological principle" on which it rests is an unproven axiom.
- The stages of creation in the Book of Genesis correspond remarkably well with the stages propounded by science. This ties in well with a deist view of the origin of the universe.
- "Intelligent Design" (ID) is a pseudoscientific religion-based theory which will not stand up to scrutiny.
- Francis Collins's theory of "Theistic Evolution" with his assertion that *"The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome"* is untenable as a theory, let alone in terms of evidence. Evolution and belief in a personal God do not gel.
- By contrast, deistic evolution, a combination of evolution with belief in an impersonal God, *is* feasible.
- Jonathan Sacks's "noblest hypothesis" is unprovable.
- Sacks remarks: *"The Bible simply isn't interested in how the universe came into being. It devotes a mere 34 verses to the subject."* Instead, Sacks suggests that there is a "hint" of evolution in a strained translation of a single word in Genesis 2:3. But why is it necessary to clutch at a "hint" of evolution from one word when there is a loud shout of evolution from 34 magnificent verses — which conform remarkably well with the scientific account?
- Sacks's left-brain/right-brain dichotomy between Christianity

and Judaism, based as it is on Iain McGilchrist's book *The Master and his Emissary,* is unconvincing.

- Sacks's citing of a rabbinical debate in the Mishnah about the correct time for reciting the *Shema* prayer is not a good example of "right-brain" thinking in any event.

# CHAPTER TWO

# *A Fistful of Fallacies*

## *A. Some Atheist Fallacies*

### The Fallacy of the Kalahari Polar Bear

**A good example of this fallacy from Christopher Hitchens on Northern Ireland.**

*I have named this fallacy after the following scenario, which perfectly encapsulates it: Two strangers share a compartment on a train travelling across the Kalahari Desert. Every now and then the one man takes a small tin from his pocket and sprinkles some yellow powder from it out of the window. His fellow traveller eventually allows his curiosity to get the better of him. "I hope you will not consider me rude," he says, "but could you possibly tell me what that yellow powder is?" "Oh," replies the other, "this is a miracle powder. It keeps polar bears at bay." "Polar bears? But this is the Kalahari Desert. There are no polar bears here." "Exactly. You see how effective it is!"*

The logical sequence of this nonsensical argument goes like this:

- This yellow powder keeps polar bears at bay.
- There are no polar bears here now.
- So the yellow powder is effective.

This is not a valid argument, because the absence of polar bears is not necessarily the result of the sprinkling of the yellow powder. It could be the result of any one or more of a number of factors. The polar bears may all have been eaten by dinosaurs; the polar bears may have died from dehydration in the desert sun; or there may never have been any polar bears there in the first place — which of course is the true reason.

Christopher Hitchens repeatedly fell into this kind of error in his "religion kills" spree, blaming religion, for example, for the

"mayhem" in Northern Ireland.[77] However, as was shown in Chapter 1, the conflict was political both in its origin and in its essence and was solved when the religious shrillness was taken out of it.

Northern Ireland is not an isolated example. In many other parts of the world as well, ethnic, national or political differences have been *expressed* in religious terms without being *caused* by religious differences. This is the explanation, for example, of why Northern Germany is Protestant and Southern Germany Catholic, or why, when Northern Germany went Protestant, Poland remained staunchly Catholic while Russia expressed its national spirit through the Russian Orthodox Church.

## The Best Butter Fallacy

A choice example of this fallacy from Richard Dawkins on Islam

*The title that I have given to this fallacy comes from the Mad Hatter's Tea Party in Lewis Carroll's* Alice in Wonderland. *The March Hare had tried to repair the Hatter's watch with butter. The following conversation then ensues:*

> "I told you butter wouldn't suit the works!" he [the Hatter] added looking angrily at the March Hare. "It was the best butter," the March Hare meekly replied. "Yes, but some crumbs must have got in as well," the Hatter grumbled: "you shouldn't have put it in with the bread-knife." The March Hare took the watch and looked at it gloomily: then he dipped it into his cup of tea, and looked at it again: but he could think of nothing better to say than his first remark, "It was the best butter, you know."

The quality of the butter was of course completely irrelevant to the success or failure of the repair of the watch. This type of logical error, known in Latin as *ignoratio elenchi*, or "ignorance of the nature of refutation", was first identified by the Greek philosopher and polymath Aristotle. Alternatively, the March Hare's error may simply be classified as a *non sequitur* ("it does not follow"), meaning that the conclusion does not follow from the premise.

Richard Dawkins fell into a logical error of this kind after making the sweeping statement, *"I regard Islam as one of the great evils in the world."* When challenged, Dawkins admitted that he hadn't read the Koran. Having shot himself in the foot, he then proceeded to shoot himself in the head by means of this fallacious argument: *"Of course you can have an opinion about Islam without having read Qur'an. You don't have to read Mein Kampf to have an opinion about Nazism."*[78] This is essentially a "best butter" defence, because the place of *Mein Kampf* in Nazism is simply not comparable to the importance of the Koran to Islam. The Koran is Islam's blueprint and its place is right at the heart of the religion.

Dawkins's defence of his position on this point is also a good example of an Argument by False Analogy, because it presupposes

that *Mein Kampf* is as central to Nazism as the Koran is to Islam — which is simply not the case.

## The Bophocles Fallacy

An amusing example of this fallacy is provided by Dawkins's attempt to enlist the non-atheist Einstein posthumously in support of atheism.

I have named this fallacy after the following apocryphal tale: It used to be possible for undergraduates at certain Oxford colleges to borrow from the Porter's Lodge tutorial essays composed by previous generations of students. The story goes that a college athlete with little time or aptitude for reading borrowed such an essay on Greek Tragedy. The essay was written in a round hand in which a capital "S" could easily be mistaken for a "B". In reading the essay out aloud to his tutor in time-honoured Oxford fashion, the unfortunate student, not knowing any better, kept repeating, "Bophocles said… And Bophocles said… And Bophocles…" His tutor, who by now was practically apoplectic, eventually burst out, "Don't you mean Sophocles?" "Well, Sir," replied the hapless student, "but it says here 'Bophocles'." The student's defence was an argument from authority. In his case, of course, the "authority" was false because he had misread it.

Arguments from authority are frequently encountered in academic disputes, and they are not necessarily unmeritorious. However, citing authority can't be a substitute for reasoned argument — and it is of course essential that the authority actually supports the proposition in favour of which it is being cited!

A handwritten letter penned by Albert Einstein in 1954 was eagerly fastened on by Dawkins, who opined: *"[T]his letter finally confirms that Einstein was, in every realistic sense of the word, an atheist"* (Richard Dawkins Foundation website). The letter in question is described in a headline on the Richard Dawkins Foundation old website as *"Albert Einstein's historic 1954 'God Letter' handwritten shortly before his death."*

So anxious was Dawkins to enlist Einstein in the ranks of atheism that, when the letter was auctioned in 2008, Dawkins in his own words *"made a futile attempt to buy it as a gift for the Richard Dawkins Foundation"*. The letter was sold again on eBay in 2012 for over $3

million. *"I hope that whoever wins this auction"*, wrote Dawkins, "*will display it prominently, complete with translations into English and other languages*."[79]

Why all this fuss about one short letter? Chiefly because the letter contains this sentence: "*The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honorable but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish.*"[80]

However, this one sentence taken in isolation cannot possibly trump the accumulated evidence of Einstein's religious views — from his writings, correspondence and interviews — which make it quite plain that Einstein was no atheist.

**The 1954 letter in context**

How then are we to explain the sentence in the 1954 letter that appears to give support to the idea that Einstein was an atheist? Dawkins quotes only extracts from the letter, but in order to understand it it is important to read the whole letter, and preferably in the original German. It's only a page long in any case!

It's important to realise that this was a private letter written to a certain Eric Gutkind, a radical Jewish religious philosopher and activist. Einstein didn't know Gutkind personally, but Gutkind had sent Einstein a copy of his book *Choose Life: The Biblical Call to Revolt*, and Einstein only read the book on the "repeated suggestion" of a mutual friend, L.E.J. Brouwer.

The "God sentence" in the letter can't be read in isolation. It comes straight after a reference to "Brouwer's suggestion": "*[W]ithout Brouwer's suggestion, I would never have engaged with your book in detail, because it is written in language which is inaccessible to me.*" Then comes the "God sentence".

From this we can see that Einstein's remark in the letter about the word "God" is *not* about the word "God" generally but refers specifically to the way the word "God" was used in Gutkind's book — and Gutkind's view of God was of a highly personal God active in the day-to-day affairs of the world.

**What the 1954 letter really means**

So, what Einstein was saying in this 1954 letter is that he didn't

believe in a *personal* God — something that he had been saying repeatedly for many years. Einstein didn't mention his belief in an *impersonal* God — which is equally well documented — because in this letter Einstein is not setting out his religious philosophy but is merely responding briefly to Gutkind's views.

**Einstein's belief in an impersonal God**

In short, therefore, this 1954 letter is of no particular significance and certainly does not represent a deathbed conversion to atheism! (It wasn't even written "shortly before" Einstein's death, as the atheists like to say: Einstein lived for more than 15 months after writing the letter.) The letter is of a piece with all the other evidence we have of Einstein's religious views: rejection of a *personal* God coupled with belief in an *impersonal* God.

**Comical disquiet**

The spectacle of Richard Dawkins chasing after an unremarkable letter in the desperate hope of belatedly recruiting Albert Einstein to the atheist cause is faintly comical. But it is also disquieting. Here's why:

- If Dawkins is as sure of the correctness of his views as he claims, it should make no difference to him whether Albert Einstein (or any other big name) agrees with him or not.
- And, if Dawkins's views are wrong, Einstein's endorsement won't make them right.
- Dawkins's selective quotation from the letter is worrying — especially as he omitted to quote the run-up to the "God" passage, which puts it in context and shows that Dawkins's interpretation of the letter is wrong.
- Dawkins insists that the 1954 letter shows that "in every realistic sense of the word" Einstein was an atheist. Yet Einstein's numerous statements of belief make it clear that he was not an atheist in a "realistic" or any other sense of the word.

**Einstein: "I am not an Atheist"**

In an interview published in 1930 Einstein stated categorically: *"I am not an Atheist."* Einstein then goes on to draw an evocative

simile comparing the human mind to a child finding itself in a vast library. Here's the whole passage:

> Your question [about God] is the most difficult in the world. It is not a question I can answer simply with yes or no. I am not an Atheist. I do not know if I can define myself as a Pantheist.
>
> The problem involved is too vast for our limited minds. May I not reply with a parable? The human mind, no matter how highly trained, cannot grasp the universe. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library whose walls are covered to the ceiling with books in many different tongues. The child knows that someone must have written those books. It does not know who or how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child notes a definite plan in the arrangement of the books, a mysterious order which it does not comprehend, but only dimly suspects. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of the human mind, even the greatest and most cultured, towards God. We see a universe marvelously arranged, obeying certain laws, but we understand the laws only dimly. Our limited minds cannot grasp the mysterious force that sways the constellations. I am fascinated by Spinoza's Pantheism. I admire even more his contributions to modern thought. Spinoza is the greatest of modern philosophers, because he is the first philosopher who deals with the soul and the body as one, not as two separate things.[81]

Einstein here peremptorily rejects the atheist label, but he leaves open the possibility of defining himself as a pantheist. Pantheism (from the Greek *pan,* meaning "all" and *theos*, meaning "God") covers a variety of beliefs but is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as: *"The religious belief or philosophical theory that God and the universe are identical (implying a denial of the personality and transcendence of God); the doctrine that God is everything and everything is God."* Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) is commonly associated with pantheism, but Einstein's view of Spinoza's God is closer to deism than to pantheism.

As Einstein wrote to a rabbi in 1929: "*I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the harmony of all that exists, not in a God who*

*concerns himself with the fate and the doings of mankind*."[82]

### Einstein angry with atheists

Einstein was actually angry with atheists who tried to claim him as one of their own. His precise words as quoted by Prince Hubertus were: "*In view of such harmony in the cosmos which I, with my limited human mind, am able to recognize, there are yet people who say there is no God.* ***But what really makes me angry is that they quote me for the support of such views***" (emphasis added).[83] And again: *"[T]he fanatical atheists… are like slaves who are still feeling the weight of their chains which they have thrown off after hard struggle. They are creatures who — in their grudge against the traditional 'opium of the people' — cannot bear the music of the spheres*."[84]

Albert Einstein famously declared that he did not believe in a personal God, which he regarded as a "childlike" or "naïve" belief, but he also indicated that he would never combat such a belief, because *"such a belief seems to me preferable to the lack of any transcendental outlook*".[85] Another oft-quoted remark of Einstein's is that *"Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind*."[86]

It is hard to disagree with the simple commonsense rationality of Einstein's position — and it is worth contrasting the genuine humility of this truly great mind with the arrogance of the champions of a belief in a personal God on the one hand, and of the advocates of atheism on the other.

# *B. Some Pro-Religion Fallacies*

## Argument from False Premise

In his book *The Great Partnership*, Emeritus Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks presents an argument based on two incorrect premises. An argument based on a false premise is completely invalid but may look formally valid. Here's an example:

> All fruits are poisonous
> Apples are fruits
> So apples are poisonous

In terms of formal logic, this syllogism, as it is called, appears to be valid. However, in real terms it is obviously false. The first statement (technically known as the "major premise") is factually incorrect, which is enough to invalidate the conclusion.

An even more egregious error arises when both the major premise and the second statement (the "minor premise") are both factually incorrect:

> All fruits are poisonous
> Potatoes are fruits
> So potatoes are poisonous

There is no shortage of arguments from false premises in the current religious debate. Here's one from Jonathan Sacks's *The Great Partnership: God, Science & the Search for Meaning*. Contrasting the Jewish "right-brain" way of thinking with the Greek "left-brain" approach, Sacks singles out a phrase from Exodus as representing the *"most profound difference"* between the two ways of thinking. The phrase in question occurs in Exodus 3:14 when God first appears to Moses in the burning bush. When Moses asks God for his name, God replies with the Hebrew phrase, *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, which is usually translated into English as "I am who I am". Sacks rejects this translation and then draws some less than persuasive conclusions from that.[87]

> Sacks: The translation "I am who I am" is wrong. [*In fact, as*

*we shall see, it is* not *wrong* - M.A.]

Sacks: The translation "I am who I am" is a direct carry-over from the early Christian translations, *ego eimi ho on* (Greek) and *ego sum qui sum* (Latin). *M.A.: In fact, the Greek translation, ego eimi ho on, originated from a Jewish, not a Christian, source. It comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint prepared by a group of* Jewish *scholars about 200 years before the advent of Christianity*.[88]

Sacks instead offers a future tense translation, "I will be what, where, or how I will be." Sacks adds: "The essential element of the phrase is the dimension omitted by all the early Christian translations, namely the future tense."[89]

*M.A.*: *In Modern Hebrew the verb form "ehyeh" is strictly future tense. So, if the word "ehyeh" appeared in a modern text, Sacks's translation, "I will be" (or "I shall be") would be its only correct meaning. But Biblical Hebrew is different. It has two main tenses, the Perfect (roughly corresponding to the "past"), called by certain grammarians "qtl", and the Imperfect (roughly corresponding to the present/future), called by those same grammarians "yqtl". That means that the Imperfect form of a verb can have either a present or a future meaning. So, in Biblical Hebrew "ehyeh" can mean "I will be", as Sacks suggests, but it can also mean "I am".[90] The comment by the modern editor of Gesenius's* Hebrew Grammar *is relevant here: "[T]he once common designation of the Imperfect as a* Future *emphasizes only* one *side of its meaning."[91] The Hebrew Bible is not short of examples of the use of the Imperfect to express a present meaning. Gesenius cites, among others, the much-quoted verse from Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord." The word translated here by the English present tense "says" is in Hebrew "yomar", which in Modern Hebrew would have to be translated by the future tense "will say". In Biblical Hebrew it can be translated like that as well, but it can also be translated as an English present tense verb, "says", which obviously makes much better sense. Translating it as future tense would make the verse read: "Come now, and let us reason together, the Lord will say." This makes no sense at all. How can Isaiah know what God will say in the future? Isaiah is*

*conveying to the people what God is saying* now, *not what God will say in the future.*

*Why did the Septuagint choose to translate "ehyeh" as "I am" rather than "I will be"? Both are correct. The reason why the Septuagint translators chose to render the phrase in the present rather than in the future tense was presumably that the phrase was God's* name*, not his political manifesto, and, though "I am who I am" may seem an odd name, "I will be what I will be" is even odder.*

It is worth noting in addition that Hebrew (both Biblical and Modern) also has another way of expressing the present tense, and that is by means of a Participle. So, "I know" becomes "ani yodeah", which literally means "I knowing"; and "he walks" becomes "hu holech", which literally means "he walking". But this construction cannot be used in the case of the verb "to be", which does not have a Participial form. Instead, Hebrew uses the Tarzan approach. So, if you want to say "I am Tarzan, you are Jane", Hebrew says, "I Tarzan, you Jane". But how do you say "I am", without anything after it? The only way to say that in Biblical Hebrew is "ehyeh". To sum up, therefore, "ehyeh asher ehyeh" can mean either "I will be what I will be" or "I am who I am", and the Septuagint Jewish translators, 200 years before the time of Jesus, chose the latter more sensible version.

**Conclusion**

From his two erroneous premises — (a) the attribution of the present-tense translation to Christian translators, and (b) the rejection of that translation as wrong — Sacks then derives an unsupported conclusion: that, by contrast with the "left-brain" Greek-inspired "God of pure being" represented by the present-tense "I am who I am", the future-tense translation, "I will be what I will be", represents the "right-brain" Jewish belief "that the universe was created in love by the God of love who asks us to create in love", which Sacks describes as *"the noblest hypothesis ever to have lifted the human mind*".[92] Besides the fact that the two premises on which this is all based are incorrect, the identification of Jewish thinking with the right brain is in itself a highly dubious

proposition. How can the literal-minded rabbinical rules of Jewish conduct coupled with the intolerance shown to other Jewish groups possibly be the product of people-oriented, holistic right-brain thinking? See Chapter 5 for more on this.

## Shaving with Occam's Razor

Professor Richard Swinburne, a leading Christian apologist who has attempted to prove the existence of the Christian God by means of logical argument, falls foul of his own principle that "simplicity is evidence for truth", a version of the rule of Occam's Razor.

Swinburne claims that belief in God is the best explanation because it is *the simplest. But by "God" Swinburne means the* personal *God of Christianity, and belief in that God is far from simple. By contrast, belief in an* impersonal *God is simple, but Swinburne doesn't even mention this type of belief, deism, which is very different from the theism of conventional organised religion. (For more on the two types of Gods see Chapter 3.)*

Occam's (or Ockham's) Razor is not a fallacy but a guiding rule of logic that, where there are a number of competing explanations, all other things being equal, the simplest explanation should be chosen. It is closely related to the doctrine of *Ontological Parsimony*: "A rule of thumb which obliges us to favor theories or hypotheses that make the fewest unwarranted, or ad hoc, assumptions about the data from which they are derived."[93] Sir Karl Popper made the further point that a simple theory was more easily testable, by being more easily falsifiable, than a more complex theory that explained the data equally well.

Professor Richard Swinburne of Oxford identifies three main theories for the origin of the universe, which he defines as follows:[94]

- "Materialism" — an "inanimate explanation" of the origin of the universe, in which all material events are caused by physical events, so that everything is predetermined and human beings lack free will!
- "Humanism" — Swinburne says very little about this second alternative, and it's not easy to tell exactly what he means by it, but he appears to see it as some sort of combination of atheism with human free will.
- "Theism" — The belief that the universe was created by a

personal God.

Swinburne argues that theism is the simplest of these three explanations and is therefore the best. Monotheistic theism, or belief in one personal God, is obviously simpler than polytheism, or belief in many personal gods. But, according to Swinburne, theism is also simpler than either Materialism or Humanism. Materialism is highly complex, says Swinburne, because it depends on *"the powers and liabilities of an immense (possibly infinite) number of material objects"*, each made up of atoms, which are made up of electrons and protons, some of which are in turn made up of quarks and possibly sub-quarks. And Humanism, according to Swinburne, is even more complex. By contrast, maintains Swinburne, theism is simple. Here's Swinburne: *"There could in this respect be no simpler explanation than one which postulated* only one cause*"* (emphasis Swinburne's).[95]

**Deism vs. Theism**

But, is theism, or belief in Swinburne's God, really a simple solution? In fact, it's nothing of the kind — because it soon becomes apparent that Swinburne's God comes with a lot of baggage. He's the standard Christian personal God who, in Swinburne's phrase, is *"infinitely powerful, knowledgeable and free"*. Far from being a simple solution, belief in a personal God inevitably brings with it a number of thorny problems such as the question of miracles, the afterlife and why God allows suffering. Belief in a specifically Christian God necessarily raises even more questions, including the Trinity, salvation and the status of Jesus as the Christ.

But theism is not the only possible type of belief in a single God. Besides theism there is also deism, or belief in an impersonal God, a being of vast intelligence who designed the universe but is *not* involved in the day-to-day affairs of the world and who is therefore *not* responsive to prayer and *not* concerned with the question of evil and does *not* dole out reward or punishment.

Swinburne's claim to be applying Occam's Razor rings rather hollow. Occam's Razor is not used unless one picks the simplest of *all* viable competing explanations. By completely ignoring the possibility of an impersonal God, Swinburne inevitably ends up selecting the personal Christian God — which was his starting point in any case. So, Swinburne is also guilty of circular reasoning.

## Moving the Goalposts

Moving the goalposts essentially entails redefining objectives and giving oneself an unfair advantage. The mathematician and Christian apologist Professor John Lennox may be seen to have moved the goalposts by narrowing the definition of religious intolerance to the point of insignificance.

In *Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target* (2011) John Lennox takes issue with those who blame monotheism, and particularly Christianity, for intolerance. He singles out for attack this observation by the German philosopher and theologian Klaus Müller written in 2006: *"The thesis that there is a connection between monotheism and intolerance has been for a long time regarded as common sense even in prominent philosophical textbooks."* Lennox rejects this out of hand: *"This thesis does not stand up to serious scrutiny."*[96]

Lennox goes on: "*The question is simply this: Is the 'church militant' the 'oldest and greatest criminal organization in the world'? It is quite striking, for instance, to learn that, from 1540 to the middle of the eighteenth century, the Spanish Inquisition was responsible for 827 executions, and the Roman Inquisition for 93. Of course, there is no excuse even for one execution for a person's faith in God; but… the crimes of secular philosophies of the so-called enlightened twentieth century are far greater than the crimes of the Inquisition*."[97]

Lennox's source for these figures is the German Catholic theologian and church historian Arnold Angenendt. In fact, however, the number of executions for which the Inquisition was responsible is notoriously difficult to estimate and is the subject of much debate. But even if Angenendt's remarkably low figures are correct, Lennox is still guilty of several fallacies:

- The dates chosen by Angenendt are revealing, as the period of greatest activity of the Spanish Inquisition was prior to 1540.
- No mention is made of the export of the Spanish Inquisition to the Spanish Netherlands, where it is estimated that "at least 1,300 persons were executed for heresy between 1523 and 1566" — a period of only 43 years, not including the period of

greatest repression under the Duke of Alba, which only began in 1566.[98]

- It is meaningless to compare the deaths for which the Inquisition alone was responsible with the mass murders perpetrated by Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia and then to label these latter murders as the crimes of "secular philosophies".[99] "Conversion" to Nazism would not have spared any of the victims of the Holocaust!
- Even if the number of deaths for which the Inquisition was responsible was as low as Lennox suggests, that has no direct bearing on the degree of the Church's tolerance or intolerance. Executions and murders are of course the most extreme manifestation of intolerance, but it is still possible for a religion or a sect to have a high level of intolerance without killing anybody.

As Lennox has (obviously!) not read *this* book, he would not be familiar with the important distinction between **communal religions** and **creed religions**. Christianity is a creed religion, as is Islam. As I show in Chapter 4, creed religions tend to be intolerant. The reason for this is not hard to find. A creed religion is centred on a belief or set of beliefs, which each creed religion regards as embodying "The Truth" and acceptance of which is regarded as the key to salvation. As each creed religion, denomination or sect believes that acceptance of its particular creed is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for achieving salvation, creed religions tend to display a high degree of missionary zeal in proselytising and recruiting new converts. New converts are welcomed with open arms, while those who reject the blandishments of the missionaries are condemned as lost souls and generally inferior beings. It is for these reasons that those who are not inside the magic circle of the creed are often discriminated against.

Discrimination can take various forms falling well short of murder or even of persecution:

- *Purely religious discrimination*, as in the non-recognition of baptism by some Christian denominations of certain other denominations, whose members are therefore treated as inferior.

- The most bizarre example of this kind of discrimination is the Mormon practice of "proxy baptism" of the dead. The purpose of this is "to allow the church's faithful to have their ancestors baptized into their faith so they may be united in the afterlife".[100] However, the practice has been extended to include any dead non-Mormon considered worthy of this "honour", including Ann Frank, the Jewish holocaust victim who clearly had no interest in converting to Christianity of any kind, let alone Mormonism. The Roman Catholic Church has taken strong exception to this "erroneous practice", and, in an effort to block such posthumous baptisms "dioceses throughout the world have been directed by the Vatican not to give information in parish registers to the Mormons' Genealogical Society of Utah."[101]
- *Political discrimination*, where a dominant religion or denomination exercises power at the expense of others, as in Iran since 1979.
- *Economic discrimination*, where members of certain religions or denominations are excluded from property ownership or other economic activities.
- *Social discrimination*, as in the exclusion of Catholics and Jews from membership of a number of gentlemen's clubs and country clubs in Britain and the US until the mid-twentieth century. It is against this background that Groucho Marx's famous remark must be understood: "I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member." John F. Kennedy's parents, having been blackballed by the "WASP" Everglades Club in Palm Beach, had to join the Jewish country club in order to play golf.[102]
- *Educational discrimination*, like the exclusion from academic appointments at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge until 1871 of anyone who was not a communicating member of the Church of England.

It is clear therefore that creed religions have an intrinsic tendency to be discriminatory, but what does monotheism have to do with that? — because it may be recalled, as quoted above, that Klaus Müller attributed intolerance to monotheism, thus obviously including Judaism, which is essentially a communal rather than a

creed religion.

**Is Judaism intolerant?**

Is Judaism intolerant? Orthodox Judaism is undoubtedly intolerant of other Jewish denominations. But the intolerance displayed by orthodox Judaism is not because it is monotheistic. Judaism started out as a communal religion and as such was *not* intolerant. Just as creed religions tend naturally to be intolerant, so the natural tendency for communal religions is to be tolerant. The reason for this is that, unlike creed religions, membership of a communal religion depends on, and is an integral part of, membership of a community, a nation or a society. Communal religions treat religion as an inherent part of a person's identity and not as a separate or severable part of that identity. Communal religions do not seek or even encourage conversion to their religion, because a convert would have to become a member of their community in order to be considered a member of the religion. Communal religions are therefore exclusive in this sense, but by the same token *tolerant*, because they recognise that those who are not members of their community will naturally have their own religion. (For more on this see Chapter 4.)

When it was a purely communal religion, which it was from its inception right up to the twentieth century, Judaism was unwelcoming to prospective converts but at the same time tolerant of all other religions. So it was *exclusive* as regards non-Jews, but *inclusive* in regard to Jews. This inclusiveness is reflected in Israel's Law of Return, which allows all Jews to live in Israel and become Israeli citizens. However, in the second half of the twentieth century orthodox Judaism took on some features of a creed religion and turned those features into a religious "test". It was this move of Judaism from a purely communal religion to a hybrid between a communal and a creed religion that resulted in intolerance, though this intolerance was directed towards other Jewish denominations rather than to non-Jewish religions.

**Yazidis**

The Yazidi religion of the Kurds of northern Iraq is a good example of a communal religion which is monotheistic but not intolerant. However, the Yazidis have themselves recently been the

victims of extreme persecution, including an estimated 7,000 forced conversions and some murders, at the hands of the self-styled "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL or ISIS), a group claiming allegiance to Sunni Islam, a creed religion.[103]

## Conclusion

Intolerance, therefore, is a feature not of monotheism but rather of creed religions as against communal religions. John Lennox's special pleading on behalf of Christianity based on deaths inflicted by the Inquisition will just not stand up to scrutiny when the whole history of Christian intolerance against other Christians as well as against other religions is taken into account. Lennox would have been better advised to point to the undoubted growth in tolerance in Christianity — towards other Christians and non-Christians alike — especially since the mid-twentieth century. The reasons for this noteworthy development will be examined in the concluding chapter of this book.

# *Review of Chapter Two*

- "Religion kills", Christopher Hitchens's blanket assertion, is not justified. Though religious persecution and religious wars are undoubtedly to blame for a lot of deaths, in other cases religious labels are used in conflicts which are essentially political or economic rather than religious. Northern Ireland is a case in point, as is shown in Chapter 1.
- Richard Dawkins's remark, "I regard Islam as one of the greatest evils in the world", is another unjustifiable blanket condemnation, especially when it turned out that he had not read the Koran, an error which he then compounded by remarking, "*You don't have to read Mein Kampf to have an opinion about Nazism."*
- We then have the comical spectacle of Richard Dawkins chasing after an unremarkable one-page letter in the desperate hope of belatedly enlisting Albert Einstein to the atheist cause.
- Einstein specifically denied that he was an atheist and is on record as actually being "angry" with atheists who tried to quote him "for the support of such views". A trawl through the evidence reveals that Einstein's religious views were closest to deism.
- Jonathan Sacks builds an elaborate argument on the way a particular Biblical verse is translated. He rejects the usual English translation of Exodus 3:14 where God gives his name in Hebrew as "*Ehyeh asher ehyeh"*, which is usually translated into English as "I am who I am". Sacks rejects this translation and substitutes a future tense translation, "I will be what I will be." The reason that Sacks rejects the usual translation is (a) because he believes it is wrong, and (b) because he regards it as a Christian translation. In fact, Sacks is in error on both counts. The usual present tense translation "I am who I am" is not wrong, although Sacks's preferred future tense translation is also correct. And the present tense translation is not specifically Christian but originates from the Septuagint

translation of the Bible into Greek by *Jewish* scholars two centuries before the advent of Christianity. But Sacks then builds on these two erroneous premises the conclusion that the translation of this one verse reveals "the most profound difference" between Christian "left-brain" thinking and Jewish "right-brain" thinking. Besides the fact that the two premises on which this is based are incorrect, the identification of Jewish thinking with the right brain is itself a highly dubious proposition.

- Richard Swinburne's claim that belief in the personal God of Christianity is the best explanation because it is the simplest will not stand up to scrutiny.
- The view "that there is a connection between monotheism and intolerance" is correct insofar as monotheistic *creed* religions have an intrinsic tendency to be discriminatory. But this is not true of *communal* religions that happen to be monotheistic. Judaism presents its own problems, which are considered in Chapter 5.

# CHAPTER THREE

## *Two Types of Gods*

As we saw in Chapter 1, there is not just one type of God in whom one may believe but at least two types: a personal God and an impersonal God. Theism is the formal name for belief in a personal God, which is the mainstay of most conventional religions, and deism is belief in an impersonal God. In this chapter I show that deism is much simpler than theism and avoids the major problems associated with theism. I also show that the arguments in favour of deism are stronger than those in favour of either atheism or theism.

There are many varieties of deism, but in general it is the belief in an impersonal God as the creator of the universe and of natural laws but who is not responsive to prayer, does not dole out rewards or punishments and is simply not involved in the day-to-day affairs of the world. Belief depends not on revelation or a leap of faith but simply on reason and observation of the natural world. Deism was put in a nutshell by Professor Martha C. Nussbaum: *"Deists think of God as a rational causal principle but not as a personal judge and father."*[104]

Some of the greatest minds of all time were deists, including Anaxagoras, Leonardo da Vinci, John Locke, Leibniz, Benjamin Franklin, Adam Smith, Alexander Pope, Voltaire, Frederick the Great, James Watt, Thomas Paine, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Napoleon Bonaparte, Friedrich Schiller, Carl Friedrich Gauss, Mark Twain, Max Planck, Ernest Rutherford and (in spite of Dawkins's efforts — see Chapter 2) Albert Einstein — and possibly Charles Darwin himself, as we shall see later on in this chapter.[105]

A close relation of deism is pantheism, which identifies God with nature or the universe. Famous pantheists include Heraclitus, Spinoza, Hegel, Goethe, Beethoven, Emerson, Walt Whitman, Gustav Mahler, Debussy, Carl Jung, D.H. Lawrence — and Albert

Einstein, who can also be classified as a deist. (See Chapter 2.)[106]

Straddling as he does deism and pantheism, Einstein could possibly be classified as a believer in pandeism, a label indicating a hybrid blend of pantheism with deism, which was well described by Raphael Lataster in 2013: *"This one god could be of the deistic or pantheistic sort. Deism might be superior in explaining why God has seemingly left us to our own devices and pantheism could be the more logical option as it fits well with the ontological argument's 'maximally-great entity' and doesn't rely on unproven concepts about 'nothing' (as in 'creation out of nothing'). A mixture of the two, pandeism, could be the most likely God-concept of all."*[107]

Another variant of deism is perhaps worth a passing mention, and that is "ceremonial deism", a term used by the US Supreme Court to refer to the American national motto, "In God We Trust", references to God in the Pledge of Allegiance and in "The Star Spangled Banner", and legal formulaic utterances such as "God save the United States and this honorable Court". This awkward category of "ceremonial deism" is used by the US Supreme Court to exempt such usages from falling foul of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the US Constitution. If anything, these usages are in reality a reflection of theism rather than deism, but classifying them in that way would probably result in their abolition.[108]

According to Dawkins: *"Pantheism is sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism."*[109] Neither of these definitions is correct, but is this a tacit admission by Dawkins that atheism is not "sexy"? Despite the efforts of the atheists to rebrand deists and pantheists and enlist them in their own ranks, deism and pantheism are as far removed from atheism as they are from theism.

Somewhere between all the beliefs in God and atheism comes agnosticism, or the view that the existence of any type of God is unknown or unknowable. The term "agnostic" was actually coined as a self-description by Thomas Huxley, who was known as "Darwin's Bulldog" for his dogged support of Darwinian evolution. There are many different shades of agnosticism, ranging from "agnostic theism" to "agnostic atheism". "Agnostic theism" describes the position taken by those who do not claim to know whether there is a God but who nevertheless believe in the

existence of a personal God. “Agnostic atheism”, on the other hand, is the position adopted by those who reject belief in God while claiming not to know whether there is a God or not.

It is also perhaps worth mentioning polytheism, or belief in many gods. The religions of ancient Greece and Rome were of course polytheistic, as were most other religions of the ancient world. Among present-day religions, Hinduism is the chief representative of polytheism, although it also contains monotheistic elements. I shall not be devoting any separate discussion in this book to polytheism, because it can generally be treated as belief either in personal gods (i.e. theism), in impersonal gods (i.e. deism), or in God as nature (i.e. pantheism).

## Comparison of Theism, Deism and Atheism

### Theism — Belief in a Personal God

Theism is belief in a personal God, as found, among other religions, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But what exactly is a personal God? A “personal God” is so called because he (and personal Gods are most often identified as male) resembles a human being in having a capacity for love and other feelings (often including negative ones), endowed with supreme intelligence, who reveals himself occasionally to believers, while being at the same time supernatural, invisible and immortal — an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God, who epitomises goodness and who, having created the universe, is receptive to prayer, doles out reward and punishment, performs miracles and is active in the day-to-day affairs of the world. Some religions, notably certain Christian denominations, display in their places of worship artistic representations of God, usually as an old man with a long flowing white beard, while Judaism, Islam and certain Christian Protestant churches regard any such representations as being contrary to the prohibition on “graven images” in the Ten Commandments.

### Problems with Belief in a Personal God

Theism, or belief in a personal God, comes with a lot of baggage. Here are a few of the problems associated with belief in a personal God:

**Omniscience and omnipotence, which are both standard**

**properties of a personal God, are mutually contradictory:** Some clever-clever logicians long ago pointed out that if God knows everything, then he must already know what he himself is going to do in the future, which ties his hands as far as his future actions are concerned. So he can't be omnipotent as well as omniscient. Dawkins gleefully seizes on this point in *The God Delusion*.[110] But the real point (not mentioned by Dawkins) is that, if God is truly omniscient, everything, including all human actions, are predestined or predetermined forever. The famous church father and "doctor of the Church" Augustine of Hippo (354–430) taught that only some people (later known as the "elect") are predestined to salvation, which depends purely on God's "grace" and not on the individuals' actions, merit or will. At the same time Augustine taught that human beings have free will. These two contradictory doctrines were reconciled by teaching that although individuals have the freedom to choose their destiny, God knows in advance how they will choose. The doctrine of predestination was taken to its logical conclusion by the Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509–64), and predestination remains one of the key tenets of Calvinist theology to this day. Calvin's teachings were used by his followers to resist rulers who were seen as ungodly. A good example was the hostility towards the staunchly Catholic Mary Queen of Scots (1542–87) on the part of John Knox (c. 1514–72) and Christopher Goodman (1520–1603). The way this was justified in Calvinist theology was as follows: whoever your ruler is owes his position to the will of God; but if that ruler acts in an ungodly manner he loses his divine right and must be resisted. The doctrine of predestination is open to attack on many fronts. Calvin's version of it was early on attacked on the ground that it made God the author of sin. Belief in the "elect" is certainly exclusive and arrogant, and in practice meant that those who believed in this doctrine assumed that *they* were the "elect" of God and everyone else was damned. Needless to say, there is no evidence of predestination, or even of any of the less extreme versions of divine omniscience or omnipotence.

**Revelation:** Most conventional religions rely to greater or lesser extent on a supposedly sacred text or scriptures which supposedly contain divine revelations. The best examples are the Jewish and Christian Bibles, the Book of Mormon and the Koran. There are wide variations in the degree of literalness with which these sacred

texts are read. These range, for example, from the literal acceptance by some fundamentalist Jewish and Christian "Young Earth Creationists" of the account in Genesis that the universe was created in six days — all the way over to the liberal theology of certain Anglican clerics like Bishop John Robinson, who in his book *Honest to God* (1963) rejected the idea of "God up there" and "God out there" alike, in favour of the existentialist theological view of Paul Tillich as "God as the ground of our being". Most conventional religions believe that God has revealed himself to individuals, either in response to prayer or supplication, or at least to specific individuals in history, such as Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus or Muhammad.

**Dogmas:** As is shown in Chapter 4, there are essentially two kinds of theistic religions: communal religions and creed religions. Creed religions like Christianity and Islam are based on a set of beliefs or a confession of faith, in some cases involving acceptance of numerous dogmas. Communal religions, by contrast, tend to have only vague beliefs, if any.

**The problem of prayer:** Prayer figures very prominently in most religions, and believers are commonly given the impression that their prayers will be answered. The cynical retort that all prayers *are* answered but that sometimes the answer is "No" will be unlikely to satisfy many devout believers. Some religions actually stick their necks out so far as to guarantee a favourable response to prayer. A good example of this is the Roman Catholic "Never Fail Novena", a definite promise contained in small slips of paper left lying around in church pews. The instruction on the paper is simple: *"Say 9 Hail Marys. Say this prayer for 9 days in succession and leave 2 copies of it in church each day. On the 8th or 9th day your request will be granted. THIS NOVENA HAS NEVER FAILED."* (From a sample actually found in New York's St Patrick's Cathedral in April 2013.) This remarkable promise is available to Catholics in America at the present time. But what happens if the worshipper's request is not granted? Most religions have a couple of other options to which they can resort, the chief one being to kick the whole problem upstairs, to an afterlife with heaven and hell, with or without purgatory in between (see below).

**The problem of reward and punishment:** Religion generally tries to inculcate moral values, and believers are commonly given

the impression that they will be rewarded if they are "good" and punished if they are "bad". However, it doesn't take long for people to realise that that's not the way the world works in reality. Hence the modern cynical expression, "No good deed goes unpunished." The absence of any obvious correlation between human conduct and reward is a major problem for most religions. There are several alternative ways that religions can defuse the issue. In Christianity, divine grace in return for faith is the key to salvation: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."*[111] A Protestant Christian solution is "justification by faith alone" as distinct from the Roman Catholic doctrine of "justification by faith and works". The Protestant Reformation was sparked off by Martin Luther's famous attack in 1517 on the sale of "indulgences" by Johann Tetzel on behalf of Pope Leo X, with the slogan roughly translated into English as: *"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul into heaven springs."*[112] Indulgences are still awarded, in accordance with the Papal bull *Indulgentiarum doctrina* issued by Pope Paul VI in 1967, but now only in return for "*the most important prayers and works of piety, charity and penance*".[113]

Another solution, found for example in Judaism, is through repentance: believers are told that, however much they may have sinned, the slate will be wiped clean if they repent. But the favourite religious solution is to promise believers that their reward or punishment will come in the afterlife.

**The problem of evil and suffering:** If God is good and all-powerful, how can he allow evil to exist and flourish? The alternatives are *either* that God is the author of the evil, *or* that he allows it to exist, *or* that God is opposed to evil but cannot prevent the Devil, Satan or some other agency from creating and sustaining it. The Christian theologian and philosopher Richard Swinburne got himself badly gored on the horns of this dilemma in regard to the holocaust. *"I certainly did not attempt to justify the very wicked conduct of the Nazis,"* writes Swinburne*, "but I did and do attempt to justify God's non-interference."*[114] But, if God was powerless to prevent the holocaust, then he can't be omnipotent, and if God deliberately allowed the holocaust to take place, then he must surely be thought of as being himself at least partly responsible for it.

**Miracles:** Religions all too often pin their faith in God *not* on the basis of the regularity and harmony of nature but on miracles, which for the most part are exceptions to the regular pattern and in a sense a suspension of the normal laws of nature. Examples can be multiplied. There's the miracle of the water turned to wine, the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, the tales of miraculous cures, the countless weeping statues and of course the Shroud of Turin. The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) penned a famous attack on miracles in Section X of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* published in 1748. Hume's argument is based on his belief in empiricism, the theory that knowledge comes solely or primarily from sensory experience:

> [N]o testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish… [T]here is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good-sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves… It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature. When, therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but subtract the one from the other, and embrace an opinion, either on one side or the other, with that assurance which arises from the remainder. But according to the principle here explained, this subtraction, with regard to all popular religions, amounts to an entire annihilation, and therefore we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.[115]

In other words, as the weight of evidence in support of natural laws, like, for example, the law of gravity, greatly outweighs (no pun intended) the evidence for any miracle, the evidence in support of the miracle must be rejected. Hume has been criticised by the philosopher John Earman on the basis *"that if a solid turns the same face in a million tosses, there is only a probability, not a certainty, that the solid will turn the same face in the next trial — a probability of 1,000,001/1,000,002 according to the Bayes-Laplace rule."*[116] This

highly technical pedantic criticism still comes up with a probability against miracles of close to 100%, leaving very little chance for a miracle to slip by. And especially when it comes to an extreme miracle like raising the dead, for example, which lies at the heart of Christianity, I would have little hesitation in following Hume's commonsense approach:

> When any one tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened… If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates, then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.[117]

But if God is omnipotent, as most religions believe, why does he need to override the laws of nature — which are all his own, God's, laws anyway — in order to prove his power? The laws of nature are themselves proof of his power. Of course, the answer that religion generally provides to this conundrum is that miracles prove not only God's power but also his rewards to the faithful. This belief is useful to religion, because it will tend to inculcate faithfulness and obedience among believers. But this in itself creates yet further problems, above all the question of why good so often goes unrewarded and evil unpunished.

**Afterlife:** The problem of good and evil is then conveniently kicked upstairs to an afterlife where the inequities of earthly life are put right. Most of the major religions believe in some form of life after death, sometimes involving elaborate images of heaven and hell, with or without purgatory in between. Despite the huge amount of anecdotal evidence of people who claim to have come back from the dead, near-death experiences, and of course ghosts, there is not a shred of hard evidence that there is an afterlife of any kind, and the same applies to reincarnation — which takes the idea of an afterlife to a whole new dimension.

**Toleration:** This is a serious problem, both as regards toleration of other religions and also of other denominations, sects or groupings within the same religion. This issue is dealt with in Chapter 4, because *creed* religions have an inherent tendency

towards intolerance while *communal* religions tend to be tolerant — both communal and creed religions of course being believers in a theistic personal God.

**Why Deism is Superior to Theism**

Deism, or belief in an impersonal God, is not hobbled by any of the problems affecting theism, or belief in a personal God. There are many varieties of deism, which is not organised as a conventional religion. What follows is a summary of some of the dominant beliefs found among those who regard themselves as deists.

**Creation:** Deists believe that God designed the universe and life on earth, and possibly the laws that govern evolution.

**Omniscience vs. Omnipotence:** This is not a problem for deism, which sees God as the Designer or Creator of the universe but without any control over or involvement in the day-to-day affairs of the world.

**Reason:** Deism is based on reason as opposed to revelation or dogma.

**Revelation:** Deism does not accept the sacred status of any scriptures and does not believe that God has revealed himself to any individuals in history.

**Dogma:** Deists do not accept religious dogmas of the kind found in theistic religions.

**Miracles:** Deists don't believe in miracles.

**Prayer:** The impersonal God of deism is not responsive to prayer, which does not therefore form part of a deist's religion.

**Goodness:** Unlike the God of theism, who is a God of love (and

sometimes of hate) and stands for the triumph of good over evil, the deist God is amoral and neither good nor bad.

**Evil and suffering:** Deists believe that man has free will. The impersonal God of deism is not therefore responsible for any evil or suffering in the world.

**Reward and punishment:** This again is irrelevant to the impersonal God of deism, who does not interfere in the day-to-day affairs of the world.

**The afterlife:** Deists generally harbour no illusions about life after death. They simply do not believe there is life after death.

**Toleration:** Deists are in general by far the most tolerant religious category. They are not usually organised in formal churches or temples and also generally do not actively seek converts.

**Life, the Universe & Everything**

Which offers the most credible explanation of the different stages in the development of the universe — atheism, theism or deism? My own view is that deism is the most plausible of the three. This question was largely covered in Chapter 1, so here I will essentially draw the threads together. The main stages of the development of the universe, condensed into three, again are:

**i. The coming into existence of** the universe, including the earth.

We found in Chapter 1 that this first stage was far more complex than is commonly assumed, being made up of several "epochs". Even if the "Big Bang" theory is correct, that does not mean that the universe came into existence in a momentary flash. The "Big Bang" theory itself estimates that it took 9 billion years after the Big Bang for the solar system, including the earth, to take shape.[118]

Popular though the Big Bang theory is among scientists and non-scientists alike — including Pope Pius XII — it is certainly not impregnable.

Stephen Hawking's basing the Big Bang on the law of gravity, as discussed in Chapter 1, immediately begs two questions: First, how could the law of gravity have existed before there was any matter for it to operate on? And secondly, if the law of gravity existed, how did that law come about? We could do worse than to follow Sir Fred Hoyle, who, though an atheist, concluded that *"the laws of nuclear physics have been deliberately designed with regard to the consequences they produce inside the stars."* Hoyle added: *"If not, then we are back again at a monstrous sequence of accidents."*[119] Deliberately designed — but by whom? Enter the impersonal God of deism, who obviously has a better claim not only than an atheistic "monstrous sequence of accidents" but also than the personal theistic God of conventional religion with all his baggage. Moreover, if we choose theism over deism, which personal God will

we select — the Jewish God, the Christian Trinity or Islam's Allah? Whichever one was chosen would amount to an endorsement of the truth of that particular religion. On balance then deism must surely be preferred to either atheism or theism in this regard.

**ii. The origin of life**

As we saw in Chapter 1, there is a welter of scientific and pseudo- scientific theories on the origin of life, none of which is based on any real evidence. Some evolutionists have tended to fudge the divide between the origin of life and the start of evolution by natural selection. But the point is that natural selection, as a gradual process of biological change and variation, could not start until there was life on earth, so any attempt to explain the origin of life in terms of evolution is doomed to failure from the start. The subtitle of Dawkins's *Blind Watchmaker* gives the impression of attributing to evolution not only the origin of life but possibly even the existence of the universe itself: *"Why the evidence of evolution reveals a universe without design."* But, as we saw in Chapter 1, Dawkins does in fact appear to realise that evolution cannot possibly explain the two stages of the universe's existence that predate evolution and are prerequisites for the start of evolution. Theories of the origin of life such as the so-called Clay Theory and "abiogenesis", which postulate a gradual step-by-step process, are equally unhelpful.

It was in fact specifically in opposition to "abiogenesis" that Sir Fred Hoyle made his famous "junkyard tornado" remark: "*The chance that higher life forms might have emerged in this way is comparable to the chance that a tornado sweeping through a junkyard might assemble a Boeing 747 from the materials therein*."[120] Hoyle calculated the probability of the gradual evolution of cellular life was about 1 in 10 to the power of 40,000. Hoyle also pointed out that, "*Life as we know it is, among other things, dependent on at least 2,000 different enzymes. How could the blind chances of the primal sea manage to put together the correct chemical elements to build enzymes?*"[121] On the basis of these arguments Hoyle argued in favour of panspermia, the theory that life on earth came from outer space.[122] But this is no better than the theories that Hoyle rejected, because it begs the question of how life in the galaxy concerned arose in the first place.

The complexity of even a single cell is indeed mind-boggling, as we saw in Chapter 1, where Michael Denton is quoted as describing a cell as *"far more complicated than any machinery built by man and absolutely without parallel in the non-living world"*.[123] So much therefore for the various attempts to attribute the origin of life to an absence of Design. But what about the theories that link life on earth with a theistic personal God? At first sight there does not appear to be much difference between attributing the origin of life to a personal God and attributing it to an impersonal God. However, the problem for theism is the leap of faith required to accept all the baggage that is inextricably linked with belief in such a God: including omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, control of the day-to-day affairs of the world and the doling out of rewards and punishments. All in all, then, deism would seem to be the best fit for the origin of life on earth.

### iii. Variation and change in living organisms

It was only after the emergence of life on earth that evolution by natural selection could take off, which Dawkins describes as "*the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered"* and which *"has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind's eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the blind watchmaker*."[124]

Dawkins is at pains to stress that natural selection is not random:

> Design is not the only alternative to chance. Natural selection is a better alternative. Indeed, design is not a real alternative at all because it raises an even bigger problem than it solves: who designed the designer? Chance and design both fail as solutions to the problem of statistical improbability, because one of them is the problem, and the other one regresses to it. Natural selection is a real solution.[125]

There *is* some biological evidence for natural selection, but there is no proof of Dawkins's belief that the process is non-random, and, if it *is* non-random does that not presuppose some guidance at least if not design?

Dawkins makes much of the "counter-intuitive" theory of the

atheist philosopher Daniel Dennett:

> [Dennett] pointed out that evolution counters one of the oldest ideas we have: 'the idea that it takes a big fancy smart thing to make a lesser thing. I call that the trickle-down theory of creation. You'll never see a spear making a spear maker. You'll never see a horse shoe making a blacksmith. You'll never see a pot making a potter.' Darwin's discovery of a workable process that does that very counter-intuitive thing is what makes his contribution to human thought so revolutionary, and so loaded with the power to raise consciousness.[126]

Amusing stuff! But does natural selection really prove that smaller simpler things can create bigger more complex things? Even Darwin's own defence of that idea in regard to the famous example of the eye is expressed in guarded terms (quoted from the 1872 edition of *Origin of Species*):

> To suppose that the eye with all its inimitable contrivances… could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest degree… Reason tells me, that if numerous gradations from a simple and imperfect eye to one complex and perfect can be shown to exist, each grade being useful to its possessor, as is certainly the case; if further, the eye ever varies and the variations be inherited, as is likewise certainly the case; and if such variations should be useful to any animal under changing conditions of life, then the difficulty of believing that a perfect and complex eye could be formed by natural selection, though insuperable by our imagination, should not be considered as subversive of the theory.[127]

With his usual frankness, Darwin is here effectively admitting that there is no proof of natural selection. And even Darwin's champion, Thomas Huxley (1825–95), was never convinced of natural selection. Huxley, himself a distinguished biologist and known as "Darwin's Bulldog" for his dogged and enthusiastic advocacy of Darwinian evolution, starting with the famous debate with Bishop "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce in 1860, never made a secret of his doubts about natural selection. For example: "*Until selection and breeding can be seen to give rise to varieties which are infertile with*

*each other",* he wrote in 1862 and on a number of occasions later on, *"natural selection cannot be proved."*[128]

Darwin's repeated response to Huxley's objection was along these lines:

> The empirical evidence you call for is both impossible in practical terms, and in any event unnecessary. It's the same as asking to see every step in the transformation (or the splitting) of one species into another. My way so many issues are clarified and problems solved; no other theory does nearly so well.[129]

Also worth noting are Sir Fred Hoyle's doubts about natural selection, expressed in his characteristically down-to-earth (no pun intended) witty manner:

> Well, as common sense would suggest, the Darwinian theory is correct in the small, but not in the large. Rabbits come from other slightly different rabbits, not from either soup or potatoes. Where they come from in the first place is a problem yet to be solved, like much else of a cosmic scale.[130]

In other words, natural selection works in regard to small variations but does not explain the larger ones. Dawkins's use of Dennett's "counter-intuitive" theory is primarily intended to knock God or any designer off his pedestal and to suggest that the "counter-intuitive" theory provides a simpler explanation than design — and he assumes that simpler means better. Dawkins advisedly does not invoke the principle of Occam's Razor, which is discussed in Chapter 2, where it is shown that Dawkins's vaunted justification of his supposedly simple solution does not conform to the requirements of that time-honoured principle.

## Other Mechanisms of Evolution

Although natural selection is central to the Darwinian theory of evolution, it is not the only mechanism identified by that theory, other basic mechanisms of evolution including what are termed "genetic drift", "mutation" and "migration" (or "gene flow"), all of which are admitted by evolutionists to be essentially random — which however still does not solve the problem identified by

Hoyle.[131]

### Random Genetic Drift

Dawkins appears to assume that natural selection is the main driving force of evolution.[132] But, as P.Z. Myers at Pharyngula explains, "Neutral Theory" and "Nearly Neutral Theory" was victorious over natural selection, and that *"random, not selective changes dominate our history*".[133] Larry Moran at Sandwalk explains: *"What Neutral Theory tells us is that a huge number of mutations are neutral and there are far more neutral mutations fixed by random genetic drift than there are beneficial mutations fixed by natural selection. The conclusion is inescapable. Random genetic drift is, by far, the dominant mechanism of evolution.*"[134] But Moran also cautions us against equating genetic drift with Neutral Theory.

### Dawkins "Not a Scientist"

Another major disagreement amongst evolutionists is the heated exchange between Dawkins and the famous Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson. Dawkins condemned Wilson's 2012 book *The Social Conquest of Earth* as containing *"many pages of erroneous and downright perverse misunderstandings of evolutionary theory"* and concludes: *"[T]his is not a book to be tossed lightly aside. It should be thrown with great force. And sincere regret."*[135] Wilson's reply was withering. Dismissing Dawkins as an *"eloquent science journalist",* he explained: *"What else is he? I mean journalism is a high and influential profession. But he's not a scientist, he's never done scientific research. My definition of a scientist is that you can complete the following sentence: 'he or she has shown that…'."*[136] And what is the dispute about? It is about Wilson's rejection of "kin selection" in favour of "group selection" as an evolutionary mechanism for altruism. The biologist Jerry Coyne agrees with Dawkins, writing: *"[L]ittle evidence exists that selection on groups has promoted the evolution of any trait."*[137] And David Sloan Wilson (no relation to E.O.) in turn damned Coyne with faint praise: *"When it comes to his research area of speciation, Jerry is a world-class authority… When it comes to the topic of group selection, however, he hasn't written a single paper and there's little evidence that he's read the literature*."[138]

These major disagreements among evolutionists only underline just how tenuous the evidence is for their various theories, which

all clash with one another. Does this not leave room for some guiding force, such as an impersonal God?

**Was Darwin a Deist?**

What about the religious position of Charles Darwin himself, the Daddy of natural selection? Dawkins is quick to invoke his sacred name, yet Darwin's view of the process was not quite the same as Dawkins's. Instead of seeing the whole process (after the emergence of life on earth) as a purely automatic and non-random process, Darwin saw it as divided into two, with the bigger features governed by "fixed laws" or "designed laws" while the details were left to "chance". This fits the facts of evolution much better than Dawkins's view and also happens to fit in better with deism than with either atheism or theism. Does this make Darwin a deist? Very likely, as we shall see later on in this chapter.

**Deism vs. Atheism & Theism**

On balance, therefore, deism has the advantage over both atheism and theism at each of the three stages of the development of the universe. It *does* beg the unanswerable question that Dawkins so enjoys posing whenever he comes across any form of Design, "Who designed the designer?" But theism of course begs the same question. And, as we have seen, the explanations favoured by the atheists at all three stages likewise cry out in vain for an explanation of how *they* began.

**Deism an Embarrassment to Atheists**

No wonder therefore that atheists like Richard Dawkins are so anxious to brush deism under the rug! This is done in several different ways.

The New Atheists are chiefly concerned to attack organised religion and the belief in a personal God, or theism. In the process they either lump deism together with theism or try to convert deism into a form of atheism. Both of these approaches are wrong. Dawkins admits that *"no doubt many"* American Founding Fathers were deists, but adds gratuitously: *"Certainly their writings on religion in their own time leave me in no doubt that most of them would have been atheists in ours*."[139] Dawkins does not cite any of these writings. But a glance, for example, at the writings of Thomas Jefferson

makes it clear that he was no atheist. The obvious starting point is the Declaration of Independence itself, in which there are references to "Nature and Nature's God", to a "Creator" and even to "divine Providence", the first two being basic deistic concepts and the last essentially a theistic one — and nothing in the document being in the least atheistic. Right at the outset we read that the basis of the claim for independence is *"the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God"*, and we then come to the most oft-quoted part of the Declaration of all: *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."*[140]

In *The God Delusion* Dawkins is anxious to stress that the "God delusion" of his title refers only to belief in a personal God. It "*does not refer to the God of Einstein"* and certain "*other enlightened scientists"*. He continues*: "That is why I needed to get Einsteinian religion out of the way to begin with: it has a proven capacity to confuse."*[141] The confusion that Dawkins is referring to is confusion between the personal God of theism and the impersonal God of deism.

**"Intellectual High Treason"**

Dawkins is obviously embarrassed by deism, as can be seen from his outburst at the end of this passage in *The God Delusion*:

> I wish that physicists would refrain from using the word God in their special metaphorical sense. The metaphorical or pantheistic God of the physicists is light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language. *Deliberately to confuse the two is, in my opinion, an act of intellectual high treason*.[142] [Emphasis added]

This remarkable accusation of "intellectual high treason" levelled against physicists who believe in an impersonal God reveals just how much of an embarrassment deism is to Dawkins. The "deliberate confusion" to which Dawkins refers is confusion between deism and theism. But who is to blame for this confusion? Not the theists, who tend to regard believers in an impersonal God as heretics or infidels. And not the deists, who invariably

specifically reject the personal God of organised religion. It is atheists who tend to lump together all kinds of belief in a God. And it serves the purposes of atheists to create this confusion, because it enables them to dismiss deism on the basis of arguments that are not applicable to deism but only to theism, which is much more vulnerable to attack by atheism than deism is.

**Darwin: "I Have Never Been an Atheist"**

Charles Darwin himself could probably be most accurately described as alternating between deism and agnosticism. Unlike some of his latter-day disciples, Darwin was a modest man who was not afraid to express doubts about his beliefs and even his ideas. He was also a conflicted soul. But above all, Charles Darwin was not an atheist. Darwin's unequivocal declaration that he had never been an atheist occurs in a letter dated 7 May 1879 from Darwin to John Fordyce, a sceptic and the author of a book titled *Aspects of Scepticism*. The body of the letter in its entirety reads as follows:

> It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent theist & an evolutionist. — You are right about Kingsley. Asa Gray, the eminent botanist, is another case in point — What my own views may be is a question of no consequence to any one except myself. — But as you ask, I may state that my judgment often fluctuates. Moreover whether a man deserves to be called a theist depends on the definition of the term: which is much too large a subject for a note. In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. — I think that generally (& more and more so as I grow older) but not always, that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.[143]

Darwin even went so far as to attempt to reconcile religion and evolution. The second and all later editions of *Origin of Species* contain this remarkable passage:

> I see no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of any one. A celebrated author and divine has written to me that "he has gradually learned to see that it is just as noble a conception of the Deity to believe that He created a few original forms capable of self-development into other and needful forms,

> as to believe that He required a fresh act of creation to supply the voids caused by the action of his laws".[144]

The "celebrated author and divine" referred to here was none other than Charles Kingsley (1819–75), the author of *The Water-Babies* who was very close to the royal family and who became an enthusiastic supporter of Darwin's while remaining committed to Christianity. The passage of Kingsley's letter which Darwin quotes ends with the remark: *"I question whether the former be not the loftier thought."*[145] In other words, belief in a God who designed a few basic models capable to self-development and variation may be preferable to the conventional belief in a God who created every new biological feature separately. Although neither Kingsley nor Darwin uses the word "deism" to describe this idea of a God who designed some basic forms and then left them to develop themselves, this picture accords well with the idea of the impersonal God of deism. It is important to note that this new understanding that Kingsley describes is not just what *he* believes but what he attributes to Darwin — and Darwin's proud quoting of this letter in *Origin of Species* indicates that Darwin did not disagree with this.

Contrary to the New Atheists, Darwin made it clear that he saw no necessary conflict between religion and evolution. Compare this with Dawkins's position as stated in a talk on "Militant Atheism" given in America in April 2007: "*Many individual evolutionists, like the Pope, are also religious, but I think they're deluding themselves. I believe a true understanding of Darwinism is deeply corrosive to religious faith."* And: "*Evolution is fundamentally hostile to religion.*"[146]

As we have seen, Charles Darwin admits that his "judgment often fluctuates" but insists that even in his "most extreme fluctuations" he never was an atheist. Darwin settles for the label "agnostic", indicating doubt about whether there is a God or not — which of course is not the same thing at all as being an atheist. In his posthumously published *Autobiography* Darwin applies the label "agnostic" to himself again, specifically in regard to "the mystery of the beginning of all things": *"The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic*."[147] And in 1917 his son Sir Francis Darwin stated that he had *"no reason whatever to believe that he [Charles Darwin] ever altered his agnostic point of view*".[148]

Probably the most comprehensive statement of Darwin's beliefs is to be found in a letter of 22 May 1860 from Darwin to his friend, the leading American botanist Asa Gray, who was a staunch supporter of Darwin's and at the same time a committed Christian (or, as Darwin himself later described him in his 1879 letter to Fordyce quoted above, "an ardent Theist and evolutionist"). In this important 1860 letter Darwin agrees with his friend that his own views "are not at all necessarily atheistical" and seems to be thinking of a hierarchy of natural laws:

> With respect to the theological side of the question, this is always painful to me. — I am bewildered. — I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae [wasps] with the express intention of their [larvae] feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed. On the other hand I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe, and especially the nature of man, and to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance. Not that this notion at all satisfies me. I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton. — Let each man hope and believe what he can. — Certainly I agree with you that my views are not at all necessarily atheistical. The lightning kills a man, whether a good one or bad one, owing to the excessively complex action of natural laws, — a child (who may turn out an idiot) is born by the action of even more complex laws, — and I can see no reason why a man, or other animals, may not have been aboriginally produced by other laws; and that all these laws may have been expressly designed by an omniscient Creator, who foresaw every future event and consequence. But the more I think the

more bewildered I become.[149]

Darwin's two-tier view of nature is encapsulated in this succinct sentence: "*I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance*." Where do these "designed laws" come from? Surprisingly, perhaps, Darwin "can see no reason why" these laws may not have been "expressly designed by an omniscient Creator" — and he then retreats again into agnosticism: "But the more I think the more bewildered I become" — which picks up the beautiful evocative image at the end of the previous paragraph: "*I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton*."

According to this, some laws take priority over others: the big features of nature are controlled by "fixed laws" designed by "an omniscient Creator", with the details "left to the working out of what we may call chance".

This ties in with the brief statement of Darwin's belief which occurs in a letter of 1870 to Darwin's friend, the well-known botanist Sir Joseph Hooker appended to his *Autobiography*: "*My theology is a simple muddle; I cannot look at the universe as the result of blind chance, yet I can see no evidence of beneficent design, or indeed of design of any kind, in the details.*"[150] According to this there are only two categories: "blind chance" and "design", with the big features being designed while the details are left to chance. This classification contrasts with that of Dawkins, who, as we have seen, insists that natural selection is quite distinct from either chance or design.[151]

Darwin's reason for his tiered view of nature appears to be two-fold. First, because nature does sometimes make apparent mistakes: e.g. people born deaf or blind, or with missing limbs. But the main reason for Darwin's inability to accept that the whole universe is the result of design is the existence of suffering in the world. It should be recalled that when Darwin went up to Christ's College, Cambridge, to read for the ordinary degree (his qualifications were not good enough for him to read for the Tripos or Honours degree!), his intention was to become a clergyman — and, though he lost his faith in Christianity, he always remained highly moralistic.

Darwin admits that suffering may sometimes be useful for a

moral purpose in man, but then adds:

> [W]hat advantage can there be in the sufferings of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time? This very old argument from the existence of suffering against the existence of an intelligent first cause seems to me a strong one; whereas, as just remarked, the presence of much suffering agrees well with the view that all organic beings have been developed through variation and natural selection.[152]

Darwin here jettisons the whole idea of "an intelligent first cause" purely on the basis of suffering among "the lower animals", which ties in with his remarks in the quoted letter to Asa Gray about his concerns involving wasps — and even the cruelty of cat-and-mouse play.

Darwin's *Autobiography*, which was written towards the end of his life and published posthumously, contains at least two contradictory passages, one rejecting intelligent design and the other going in the opposite direction:

> Although I did not think much about the existence of a personal God until a considerably later period of my life, I will here give the vague conclusions to which I have been driven. The old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows. Everything in nature is the result of fixed laws.[153]

Compare this with:

> Another source of conviction in the existence of God, connected with the reason and not with the feelings, impresses me as having much more weight [than belief in the immortality of the soul]. This follows from the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense

> and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity of looking backwards and far into futurity, as the result of blind chance or necessity. When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a theist.[154]

The remark "and I deserve to be called a theist" is surprising, as Darwin clearly rejected the Christian idea of God because of the existence of cat-and-mouse cruelty, as we saw above. But Darwin later added:

> This conclusion was strong in my mind about the time, as far as I can remember, when I wrote the Origin of Species; and it is since that time that it has very gradually with many fluctuations become weaker.[155]

However, in the second and later British editions of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, there are at least two specific references to "the Creator":

> Therefore I should infer from analogy that probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some one primordial form, into which life was first breathed by the Creator.[156]

And again:

> Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed laws of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.[157]

These references to "the Creator" do not appear in the original 1859 edition of *Origin of Species*.[158] However, a possible reference to this passage occurs in a letter to J.D. Hooker of 29 March 1863, where Darwin expresses regret for using the Pentateuchal (i.e. Biblical, from the Five Books of Moses) "term of creation":

> But I have long regretted that I truckled to public opinion & used Pentateuchal term of creation, by which I really meant "appeared" by some wholly unknown process. — It is mere rubbish thinking, at present, of origin of life; one might as well think of origin of matter.[159]

### Kenneth Miller's Fundamental Mistake

Kenneth Miller, a biologist who is both an evolutionist and a committed Roman Catholic, concludes his book *Finding Darwin's God* by quoting the passage cited above from the end of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Miller comments: *"What kind of God do I believe in? The answer is in those words. I believe in Darwin's God."*[160] This statement of Miller's is just plain wrong. Miller is a theist and his God is the full-blown personal God of Christianity, precisely the type of God rejected by Darwin, as we have seen, because of the existence of suffering in the world.

Why then does Dawkins commend Miller's *Finding Darwin's God*? Here's what Dawkins said in a 2007 talk on "Militant Atheism": "*People like Kenneth Miller could be called a 'godsend' to the evolution lobby — (Laughter) — because they expose the lie that evolutionism is, as a matter of fact, tantamount to atheism*." This may give us the impression that Dawkins believes that evolutionism is compatible with religion. Yet, he continued by explicitly declaring that "*evolution is fundamentally hostile to religion*", adding, as cited above, that religious evolutionists like the Pope were "*deluding themselves*" by thinking otherwise.[161]

There is a disconnect here. But, regardless of Dawkins's views on Miller, there can be no doubt that Miller's claim to believe in "Darwin's God" is dead wrong. Darwin's beliefs fluctuated, but they never fluctuated as far as atheism at the one extreme and theism at the other.

## Was Darwin a Deist?

Darwin was neither an atheist nor a theist. So what alternative positions are left? Essentially two: agnosticism, a label which Darwin sometimes applies to himself, evidently with some reluctance; and deism, or belief in an impersonal God, which Darwin never mentions but which would actually appear to be quite a good match for his beliefs. Here are some reasons why Darwin

may be labelled a deist:

- Darwin's concern about suffering — even extending to cat-and-mouse play — made him reject belief in the personal loving God of theism. But the impersonal God of deism is neutral and amoral and would presumably have designed cat-and-mouse games as part of the natural order of things;
- Darwin's two-tier universe, with the big picture governed by "designed laws" or "fixed laws" while the details are left to chance, fits well with deism: the universe is created by a supernatural Designer, who is also responsible for the origin of life and who then sets up evolution by natural selection as the mechanism for further variations.
- There is a mismatch between *theism* and evolution but not between *deism* and evolution. Evolution is based on scientific evidence, while belief in a theistic personal God requires a leap of faith. Moreover, if you are trying to combine theism with evolution, which theistic God are you to choose? Should it be the Christian God, complete with a divine Christ, a Holy Spirit, miracles, an afterlife and intercession in the day-to-day world? Or perhaps the more genuinely monotheistic Jewish or Islamic God? Or maybe the polytheistic Gods of Hinduism?
- As we have also seen, the combination of deism and evolution also neatly fits in with the divide between the three stages of the earth's development: (i) the coming into existence of the universe, including the earth; (ii) the origin of life; and (iii) evolution by natural selection.

The existence of cruelty in the world — even including a cat playing with a mouse — is what made Darwin reject belief in creation by "a beneficent and omnipotent God". That is a picture of the personal God of theism. The impersonal God of the deists, on the other hand, is neither "beneficent" nor "omnipotent" but completely amoral and not involved in the day-to-day affairs of the world. So the impersonal God of the deists could not possibly prevent the existence of cruelty in the world. Therefore, the existence of cruelty should be no bar to believing in an impersonal God.

Why didn't Darwin realise this? In fact, although deism had had

its adherents for many centuries before Darwin's time and although Darwin's own extended family was strongly Unitarian (which was theist, not deist, at the time) and his grandfather Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802) was a well-known freethinker and natural philosopher, there is no indication that Darwin was consciously aware of deism. Darwin's direct religious background and his intention in going up to Cambridge to become an Anglican clergyman only corroborate this impression.

But, although the existence of cruelty made Darwin reject belief in the personal God of conventional religion, he did not reject belief in deliberate design altogether. He ends up with a two-tier universe, in which the big picture is the result of *"designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance*".[162]

Where did these "designed laws" or "fixed laws", as he calls them elsewhere, come from? Darwin made no secret of his belief that they were designed by "an omniscient Creator". The phrase "whether good or bad" is significant and places Darwin in a position not very different from a believer in an impersonal God, who is amoral and uninvolved in the world. So, although Darwin may not have been conscious of deism as such, his own religious beliefs are a good match for deism, or possibly for pandeism (as discussed earlier in this chapter).

## *Review Of Chapter Three*

- There are two main types of Gods in whom one may believe: a personal God and an impersonal God. Belief in a personal God, or theism, is the basis of conventional religion, while belief in an impersonal God, or deism, tends to be more informal.
- Theism comes with a lot of baggage, such as divine omniscience, omnipotence, revelation, reward and punishment, and miracles — for none of which is there any reliable evidence and which therefore require a leap of faith.
- Deism has none of this baggage and is therefore a lot easier to accept than theism.
- The subtitle to Dawkins's *Blind Watchmaker* — "*Why the evidence of evolution reveals a universe without design*" — is misleading.
- There are three (condensed from seven) stages in the development of the universe: (i) the coming into existence of the universe; (ii) the origin of life; and (iii) change and variation in living organisms.
- Evolution obviously can't explain the first two stages, because life is needed before evolution can kick in.
- Deism offers a more plausible explanation than either atheism or theism for the coming into existence of the universe.
- Deism also offers a more plausible explanation than either atheism or theism for the origin of life.
- As for stage three, Dawkins's insistence that natural selection is not random combined with Daniel Dennett's "counter-intuitive" theory that smaller simpler things can create bigger more complex things is not convincing.
- Darwin's writings themselves effectively admit that there is no proof of natural selection.
- Natural selection works in regard to small variations but does not explain the larger ones.

- Moreover, random genetic drift rather than natural selection now appears to be the main mechanism of evolution.
- There are some heated disputes among evolutionists, including a major spat between Dawkins and E.O. Wilson, the famous Harvard biologist, in which Wilson denied that Dawkins is a scientist, describing him instead as an “eloquent science journalist”.
- These major disagreements among evolutionists only underline just how tenuous the evidence is for their various conflicting theories.
- Deism is an embarrassment to the New Atheists, and Dawkins even charges physicists who are deists with “intellectual high treason”.
- Darwin himself stated quite unequivocally: “I have never been an atheist.”
- Darwin was also not a theist — despite Kenneth Miller’s claim in *Finding Darwin’s God* that he, a committed Roman Catholic, believes in “Darwin’s God”.
- Darwin sometimes described himself as an agnostic, but his expressed religious beliefs are in general more in keeping with deism, or possibly with pandeism.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *Two Types of Religion*

The atheist author Christopher Hitchens denounced "organized religion" as "*violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children*".[163] It should be noted that this litany is applied only to "organized religion" and is therefore presumably — and justifiably — not meant to include deism. However, even the mildest of these poisonous epithets — "intolerant" — cannot be accepted as a blanket description of *all* theistic religions either. A distinction has to be drawn between two types of theistic religions: *communal* religions and *creed* religions, and, though creed religions have tended to be intolerant, communal religions are generally tolerant — and degrees of toleration have fluctuated over time.

The classification of theistic religions into *communal religions* and *creed religions* was first suggested by myself in my book *Is Christianity True?,* originally published in 1984.[164] It is not the only way that religions can be classified, and it cuts across most other classifications. But it is easy enough to justify — and, above all, I believe it is a deeper, more meaningful and more useful classification than any other.

### Why Does This Matter?

Why does the classification of religions matter? Chiefly in order to test whether there really is any correlation between a religion's classification and its degree of toleration both of other religions and also of other denominations and groupings within itself.

However, as was seen in Chapter 1, prejudice, discrimination and even conflict expressed in terms of religion may actually turn out upon closer examination to be essentially political, social or economic in nature. Northern Ireland is a case in point, as was well demonstrated by the fact that a *political* settlement was eventually

found to this essentially political conflict in the "Good Friday Agreement" of 1998, ratified by a referendum, which resulted not only in the fiercely anti-Catholic Unionist Rev. Ian Paisley working closely with the Catholic Republican Martin McGuinness in the Northern Ireland Executive, but also in their becoming firm friends, laughing and joking together and earning the nickname the "Chuckle Brothers".

The reason that creed religions tend to be intolerant is that each of them (and each denomination, group or sect) believes that *it and it alone* embodies the "truth" and holds the key to "salvation". So, by definition, all other religions or groups are inferior and as a result suffer intolerance, discrimination or persecution at the hands of the believers in the one "true" faith.

A communal religion, by contrast, will not normally regard itself as the only "true" faith and will expect other nations and peoples each to have its own religion, thus breeding toleration plus a disinclination to evangelise.

But what if it turned out that *one* religion, faith or anti-faith (e.g. atheism) did indeed embody the "truth"? Would that entitle its adherents to discriminate against "heretics", "infidels" or those who labour under "inferior" or "erroneous" beliefs? Obviously not. Yet such is the arrogance of most creed religions — and the "New Atheism" or "Militant Atheism" as well — that intolerance is endemic among them. The same attitude is not displayed by communal religions.

That is why it is important to examine the beliefs of each of the contenders to see if there is a vestige of truth to their claims. So far, as I have attempted to show, the religion that has the best claim on credibility is not really a religion at all — neither atheism, nor a creed religion, nor even a communal religion but belief in an impersonal deistic God.

Having already examined the rival claims of theism, deism and atheism in regard to the development of the universe in the previous chapter, I devote this chapter to an analysis of the dichotomy between communal and creed religions, Chapter 5 to Judaism, Chapter 6 to Christianity and Chapter 7 to Islam and Shinto, before taking a step back and viewing the whole scene from a distance and tying all the threads together in Chapter 8.

## Creed Religions

A creed religion is one which is based on a set of beliefs. Christianity and Islam are the two prime creed religions in the world today, while Judaism, Hinduism and Japanese Shinto are essentially communal religions. Every creed religion — and every denomination, group or sect within each creed religion — has a definite set of beliefs, deviation from which can result in excommunication or worse. It is typical of a creed religion to believe that it is the only "true" religion and that it holds the key to "salvation". Going hand in hand with this belief is an evangelical tendency. Creed religions are generally eager to gain new converts, so missionary zeal and proselytism are high on their agenda.

As belief is central to creed religions, the slightest variation in belief can result in non-conformists being branded as heretics or infidels. Creed religions therefore tend to be *intolerant* of other religions and even of other denominations, groups or sects within their own religion. The historic conflict between Catholics and Protestants is a prime example, as is that currently in evidence between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims.

## Communal Religions

Communal religions were the original type of religion, and most religions of the ancient world were of this type. The "pagan" civic religions of Ancient Greece and Rome are prime examples. You were deemed to be a member of the Roman religion, for example, simply by virtue of being a member of Roman society and a subject of the Roman state. That is why the Roman state religion had no distinctive name. The adherents of this ancient religion were dubbed by Christians *pagans* (meaning "country folk" or "rustics"), but that was not in any sense the name of the religion or of its devotees. The identity of "pagan" Romans was not defined by their religion but by their citizenship and their community.

For the same reason, religious conversion is *not* a feature of communal religions. For example, converting from Shintoism to Hinduism would require a Japanese person to become Indian — because these communal religions are indivisible from the societies to which they belong.

In the ancient world every state and society had its own religion with its own god or gods. Members of that society or community were expected to worship at the national shrines and perform the rituals associated with the national religion. The idea of conversion was practically unknown in the ancient world. The only time when people would convert was when they were conquered by a foreign power. Then they would be absorbed into the conqueror's state and society — and with that into the conqueror's religion.

## Alternative Classifications of Religions

My binary communal/creed classification contrasts sharply with the conventional grouping in terms of historical origins, according to which Judaism, Christianity and Islam are lumped together as belonging to the same "family" of religions sometimes labelled "Abrahamic religions". The common historical origin of these three religions is true enough but misleading, because while Christianity and Islam are creed religions Judaism is essentially a communal religion although no longer a pure one. (See Chapter 5 for more on Judaism.)

The categorisation of religions in terms of monotheism and polytheism is also unhelpful, because it again groups Judaism, Christianity and Islam together and places Hinduism and most religions of the ancient world in a separate bracket. For our purposes Hinduism should be grouped with Judaism as a communal religion, while Christianity and Islam should be bracketed together as creed religions.

Josiah Conder's 1838 classification was an expanded version of the traditional subjective fourfold grouping: Christianity, Judaism, Islam (referred to as "Mahommedanism") and "Paganism", with the addition of a few smaller categories of his own, finishing up with the highly tendentious label, "illiterate superstitions".[165]

The classification of religions into *ethnic* and *world* religions overlaps to some extent with my *communal/creed* dichotomy but is misleading and also subjective. *Some* communal religions, but by no means all, are confined to one ethnic group. The ancient Roman civic religion, for example, which was undoubtedly a communal religion, was shared by the diverse elements of the ethnically mixed population of the Roman Empire.

And the label "world religions", normally applied to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, has been criticised as an essentially western-biased classification and has led to something of a backlash against the teaching of "World Religions" courses at certain American universities.[166]

Joel Tishken has proposed replacing the ethnic/world religion

dichotomy with an ethnic/evangelical classification.[167] But that classification has the wrong emphasis for our purposes. The religions in my *creed* religion category are indeed largely evangelical or proselytising religions, but that is not their sole or even their main characteristic, which is simply that they are centred on a creed or a set of beliefs, which is not the case with *communal* religions.[168]

## Communal and Creed Religions — A Comparison

Here are some of the key respects which differentiate communal and creed religions:

### Communal Religions — No Distinctive Name

Communal religions usually do not have a name distinguishing them from their state, community or society because membership of a communal religion is an integral part of being a member of the nation, community or society concerned:

- The Roman civic religion, for example, has no specific name at all — and the label *pagan* (literally "rustic" or "countryman") was applied as a pejorative label to all non-Christians (with the exception of Jews) from the mid 4th century onwards. The full title of the famous work by Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, was *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos* ("The City of God against the Pagans").
- The civic religion of classical Greece likewise had no distinctive name. The citizens of each Greek city-state would automatically be expected to worship the civic gods as an integral part of their citizenship. "Impiety", or non-belief in the gods of the Athenian state, one of the two charges against the famous philosopher Socrates (469–399 BCE), on which he was convicted and put to death, was actually essentially a charge of treason rather than a specifically religious charge. In the late 4th century CE, after Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christians in the Greek-speaking eastern half of the Empire started calling adherents of the traditional Greek polytheistic religion *Hellenes*, which just means "Greeks". However, in the mouth of Christians it became a pejorative label equivalent to the use of *pagans* in

the western Latin-speaking half of the Roman Empire.

- Likewise, *Judaism* as the name of the communal Jewish religion, also referred originally to the community rather than to the religion as such. It was first used in its Greek form, *Ioudaismos*, in the Second Book of Maccabees, written soon after 124 BCE, in reference to the Maccabean revolt of 167–160 BCE, in which the Jews overthrew their Seleucid rulers and established an independent Jewish kingdom. In the Second Book of Maccabees the Maccabean Revolt is described as a fight *"to defend Judaism"* — clearly a reference to Jewish society as a whole and not just to the religion. *Judaism,* and with it the modern English *Jew* and *Jewish,* is derived from the geographical name, called by the Romans Judaea, which ultimately derives from the name Judah, one of the two Jewish kingdoms that resulted from the split of the Kingdom of Israel after the death of King Solomon in about 931 BCE. That name came from the name of the Tribe of Judah, one of the twelve Jewish tribes, which in turn was supposedly named after Judah, one of the sons of the patriarch Jacob, who plays a major part in the Book of Genesis. All in all, therefore, the terms *Jew*, *Jewish* and *Judaism* all refer to a nation, a people or a community, which includes religion as an integral part of its identity, but these terms do not refer specifically to the religion.
- *Hindu* and *Hinduism*, another communal religion, similarly originated from the name of the people, the society and the geographical area rather than as a specific name of the religion. See below for a fuller discussion on Hinduism.

**Creed Religions — Distinctive Name**

By contrast with communal religions creed religions and their subdivisions normally have distinctive names.

- Islam is a good example. The word *Islam*, usually translated as "voluntary submission to God", derives from the semitic triliteral root SLM, from which come the Arabic *salaam* ("peace" — also used as a greeting) and the Hebrew *shalom* ("peace" — and also used as a greeting). *Muslim*, the word for a member of the Islamic faith, is another formation from the same triliteral root.

- Jesus never called himself a “Christian”. But there was a very good reason for this — Jesus never was a Christian: he was born and died a Jew. It was Paul, not Jesus, who invented Christianity, about 20 years after Jesus’s death. Paul never met Jesus and completely transformed a small Jewish reform movement — which was still part of the Jewish communal religion — into a whole new creed religion. And it was only then that the new name “Christian” started to be used. We read in Acts of the Apostles: *“And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch*”, probably in about 50 CE.[169] The “Christian” label may possibly have been intended to have a pejorative sense, but that is not certain. When Paul was tried before the Roman procurator Porcius Festus and King Herod Agrippa II in about 60 CE, the King is reported to have said to Paul: *“In a short time you think to make me a Christian!*”[170] This appears to mean: “Do you really expect to persuade me to become a Christian in such a short time?” Was this ironic? It is hard to tell, because the King, though nominally Jewish, was evidently not at all hostile to Paul. In his response to this remark of the King’s Paul studiously avoids the use of the word “Christian”, so it is possible that it still had derogatory connotations, which however it soon lost, becoming instead a badge of pride. The point though is that Christianity is a label descriptive of a religion, not of a state, a society or a community. It relates directly to the central tenet of that religion, namely a belief in Jesus as the “Christ” — very different from the sort of labels used to describe communal religions.

**Beliefs**

Every creed religion, and every denomination, group or sect within each creed religion, has a definite set of beliefs, or profession of faith, which forms the core of the religion or sect concerned. It is by accepting these beliefs that one becomes a member of the religion or sect. There may be a simple formula — like the Islamic *Shahada* — which believers are required to accept and recite, or there may be a more elaborate creed, like the 39 Articles of Faith of the Church of England. Communal religions by contrast tend to place much less emphasis on belief, and their beliefs tend to be much less clear-cut. Acceptance of a communal religion’s beliefs,

insofar as they have any, does not entitle one to become a member of that religion. Membership depends rather on being or becoming a member of the community or society concerned, which may not be possible for outsiders to do regardless of their beliefs.

**Truth**

Every creed religion, denomination, group or sect believes that it alone holds the key to "truth" and "salvation". According to St John's Gospel, Jesus said: *"I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*."[171] Islam never portrays Mohammed as more than a prophet, but he is believed to be *the* prophet par excellence. Hence the Islamic creed, or *Shahada*, as it is called: *"There is no god but Allah and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah."* Communal religions, by contrast, do not make any such claims. Moses — described simply as he usually is in Jewish sources as *Moshe rabbenu* ("Moses our teacher") — is indeed identified in the "Thirteen Principles of Faith" compiled by the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides (c. 1135–1204) as the greatest of the prophets. But, although this compilation is nowadays generally recited in the synagogue service, it is (for Judaism) of comparatively recent vintage, has never been universally accepted by rabbinical authorities and does not enjoy the same status as a creed in the creed religions.

The well-known exchange between Jesus and Pontius Pilate brings out the difference between the two types of religion very well. Jesus says: "*To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice. Pilate saith unto him, What is truth?*"[172] Jesus probably did not actually make this arrogant claim himself. It is an early example of a claim to a monopoly of "truth" that is typical of a creed religion, which Christianity became only about 20 years after Jesus's death. Pontius Pilate's bemused reaction is credible, however, because the idea that any religion embodied "the truth" would have been alien to him as a member of the Roman state religion, a communal religion.

Arrogance

Both communal and creed religions are arrogant, but they are arrogant in different ways. The arrogance of creed religions is based on their certainty that they alone hold the key to "truth" and

"salvation". The arrogance of communal religions is based on a sense of the superiority not only of their religion but also of their nation or people. The Jewish belief that they are the "Chosen People" is probably the best-known example of this.

**Conversion**

The two different kinds of arrogance are reflected in two very different attitudes to conversion. Creed religions are anxious to show the light, as they see it, to as many outsiders as possible, to bring them into the fold and to "save" their souls. Hence the proselytising missionary zeal associated with Christianity — notably that of the Roman Catholic Church, the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses — and also with Islam.

The word *Propaganda* was actually invented by the Catholic Church in 1622 as the name for a new administrative body, the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (or the "Congregation for Propagating the Faith") dedicated to "propagating the faith" among non-Catholics.

Evangelical "born again" Christian churches tend to make it as easy as possible to convert. For example, Joel Osteen, Senior Pastor of the nondenominational Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, currently the largest Protestant church in the United States, ends every broadcast with an invitation to his viewers to become "born again" simply by reciting this prayer: *"Lord Jesus, I repent of my sins. Come into my heart. I make you my Lord and savior*."[173] It has to be said that this instant formula does have its critics! But Christianity is never difficult to convert to.

Christianity and Islam both owe their origin entirely to conversion, and their subsequent growth is also largely the result of proselytism. Communal religions, by contrast, tend to express *their* arrogance in exactly the opposite way. Instead of wanting to go out and enlist new converts, they tend to adopt an exclusivist attitude which makes it difficult if not impossible for outsiders to join them. Orthodox Judaism, for example, is decidedly unwelcoming to prospective converts. Although more liberal branches of Judaism have a more positive attitude to conversion, the idea of sending out missionaries to recruit new members would be unthinkable to them as well.

## Toleration

The differing attitudes of creed and communal religions to toleration are a reflection of their different attitudes to their own sense of superiority. As creed religions are anxious to win as many converts as possible, they tend to be intolerant of those who refuse to "see the light". Hence the persecution of "infidels" or "heretics" and the numerous religious wars of past centuries. Communal religions, on the other hand, tend to be more tolerant. Because they do not seek converts themselves communal religions can hardly object to other communities keeping to their own religions. There are only two clear references to conversion to Judaism in the whole of the Hebrew Bible. In recent times, however, some branches of Judaism have become more intolerant of one another. (See Chapter 5 for more on this.) Even Hinduism, generally a very tolerant communal religion, has been caught up in the general rise of religious extremism in recent years. In 2002 there were riots in Gujarat in which it is estimated that about 2,000 Muslims were killed. However, these riots were evidently in retaliation for the so-called Godhra Train Burning, in which 50 Hindu pilgrims were burnt alive in a train.[174]

## Case Study 1 — Hinduism

Hinduism, the oldest living communal religion in the world today, presents us with an excellent example of the integration of religion and society. Central to it is the caste system, which is at the heart of Indian society, and which is at one and the same time a social and a religious hierarchy, headed by the Brahmin priestly caste.

Discrimination against the so-called Dalits, previously known as "untouchables", who now amount to 16.2% of the Indian population and who were excluded from the caste system altogether, is illegal under Article 15 of the Indian Constitution. This made the Dalits a "Scheduled Caste", who enjoy reserved quotas in certain types of education and employment, which has resulted in a degree of affirmative action or reverse discrimination. Interestingly enough, in a case where a student's admission into a professional course reserved to members of a Scheduled Caste was cancelled two years into the course when it was discovered that she did not actually belong to such a caste by birth, the Supreme Court of India showed her no mercy. The clear ruling was: "*A person's caste cannot be changed.*"[175] This shows just how ingrained the caste system is — giving Hindus a hereditary social and communal status which is religious as well only because their religious identity is an integral part of their social and communal identity.

There have been some recent attempts to suggest that the caste system was created by 19th century British colonial rule. The British were indeed the first to use the term *caste* (from the Portuguese word *casta*) to describe what Hindus referred to as *varnas* and their sub-divisions, *jatis*, and 19th century British censuses of India certainly recorded people's castes and possibly increased the formalisation of the caste system in the process, but there is ample evidence that the caste system had been in existence for many centuries before British rule.

The caste system appears to be referred to in early Hindu scriptures, including the *Rigveda*, composed around 1400 BCE, the *Bhagavad Gita*, probably dating from at least the third century BCE, and the 2nd century BCE *Manusmriti*, which contains some laws codifying the caste system. In the West the earliest record of the

caste system occurs in the *Indika* of the Greek author and explorer Megasthenes, written in about 300 BCE.

The basis of the caste system appears to be ethnic, originating with the migration of Aryans to North India in about 1500 BCE, who spoke Sanskrit, a language related to Latin and Greek. It is from these migrants (previously generally referred to as invaders) that the many Indo-European languages now spoken in North India derive, notably Hindi, Bengali and Punjabi. These languages are unrelated to the Dravidian languages, such as Tamil and Telugu. When the light-skinned Aryans arrived in India they evidently pushed the dark-skinned Dravidians south, which is why those languages are now largely to be found in southern India.

As the dominant race politically and socially, the Aryans also occupied the upper echelons of the caste hierarchy. *Varna*, the Sanskrit word for caste, actually means "colour", and it is still generally true that the higher castes tend to have a lighter complexion than those lower down in the pecking order of Indian society and of the Hindu religion.

### Hindu Beliefs?

What are the beliefs of Hinduism? There is no shortage of Hindu gods, and the concepts of *Dharma* ("the way" of ethics and duties), *Samsara* (recurring cycle of birth, life, death and reincarnation) and *Karma* (action and reaction) are prominent in Hindu thought, but Hinduism allows its adherents complete freedom of belief. Concepts of heresy, apostasy and blasphemy play no role in Hinduism. The Supreme Court of India has defined Hinduism in these terms:

> Unlike other religions in the world, the Hindu religion does not claim any one prophet, it does not worship any one God, it does not believe in any one philosophic concept, it does not follow any one act of religious rites or performances.[176]

### Ritual

Ritual plays a major role in Hindu life, varying as it does from one region or village to another, or even from one worshipper to another. Purification by water, sacrifices and the chanting of Vedic mantras figure prominently among Hindu rituals, many of which are performed at home. The Hindu calendar is replete with festivals,

some of which are celebrated across the nation while others are more local.

**The Name "Hinduism"**

The absence of a specific name for the religion of Hinduism, as distinct from the society of which it forms an integral part, is significant. The English word *Hindu* is of Persian origin and initially referred to all inhabitants of India. From the 13th century India was often referred to as *Hindustan*, and the lingua franca of northern India and Pakistan (and the language of "Bollywood" films) is still known as *Hindustani*, a standardised and purified version of which, known as *Hindi,* has been the official language of India since 1950. The English word *Hinduism* itself is a recent coinage, dating only from the 19th century. It doesn't take much ingenuity to see that the English words *India* and *Indian*, which derive from the Greek, are also closely related to *Hindu* and *Hinduism*.

Hindus themselves traditionally referred to their religion by the Sanskrit term *Sanatana Dharma*, meaning "the eternal law", which again is not a distinctive title for the religion differentiating it from others but is rather the name for the religious side of Hindu life.

The point is that Hinduism is and remains the pre-eminent religion of India and Indians. There are more than a billion Hindus, making it the third largest religion in the world. The overwhelming majority, about 940 million of them, live in India, and over 80% of India's population is Hindu.

But, if Hinduism is *the* religion of India, why is it that 20% of India's population is non-Hindu? The answer lies in India's long and turbulent history, with conquest by the Muslim Mughals in the 16th century and British rule in the 18th to 20th centuries.

Hinduism is what might be termed the default religion of India. Indians who have not converted to Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism or some other religion are automatically still to be regarded as Hindus. And, as far as Hinduism is concerned, converts to other faiths continue to be regarded as Hindus.

What about Hindus outside the subcontinent? There are a few concentrations of Hindus, chiefly in Malaysia, Bali (part of Indonesia), Mauritius, Fiji and Guyana, but all of these are attributable to the migration of ethnic Indians to these areas and

not by conversion of other ethnic groups to Hinduism (cf. Louis Renou, 1896–1966, who suggested that Hinduism was a proselytising religion in ancient times. This is based on the spread of the religion outside the Indian subcontinent, the true explanation for this expansion being not conversion but migration of ethnic Indians).[177]

**Conversion**

In fact, Hinduism has no word for religious conversion. Although there are moves in some quarters to turn Hinduism into a missionary religion, there is little chance that this archetypal communal religion will ever move in that direction, although the affirmative action resulting from the legal protection of the Scheduled Castes has had some strange spin-offs. For example, it appears that some Indian Christians and Muslims have been seeking to convert to Hinduism as Dalits in order to benefit from Scheduled Caste status. However, the Indian Government opposes this on the ground that "Allowing Scheduled Caste status to converts" would give these converts benefits to which they were not really entitled, and also, more surprisingly, that this practice "would provide a fillip to religious conversions" — reflecting the traditional reluctance of communal religions to attract converts.[178]

## Case Study 2 — The Roman State Religion

The ancient Roman state religion is another prime example of a communal religion. Like other communal religions, it had no very definite beliefs and no distinctive name. You were deemed to be an adherent of the Roman state religion simply by virtue of being a member of Roman society.

The label “pagan”, meaning “rustic” or “countryman”, which was attached to the Roman religion after the ascendancy of Christianity, was an unflattering reference to the fact that the old religion survived chiefly in the countryside.

Perhaps most important to individuals and families in the Roman religion was the devotion to the Lares and Penates, the tutelary domestic and household gods, coupled with worship of the spirit of ancestors, the Di Manes and Di Parentes.

At national level there was a whole pantheon of gods to choose from — some of whom have given their names to planets: Mercury, Mars, Venus, Saturn and Jupiter — with a rich mythology detailing their often less than admirable qualities and adventures.

As the Roman Empire expanded to cover the whole of the Mediterranean basin with its multiplicity of peoples and races, so more and more foreign cults and religions were absorbed into the Roman state religion, which became more and more syncretist. Among the most popular of these religions were the cult of Isis from Egypt, the worship of Cybele, the “Great Mother” (Magna Mater), and the religion of Mithras, which was a particular favourite of soldiers all around the Roman world, as may be seen in the Mithraeum, or the ruins of the Temple of Mithras, in the City of London. The Roman state religion was not antagonistic or hostile to these religions but instead embraced them and enabled people to worship these foreign cults side by side with the traditional gods of the Roman pantheon. This is also evidenced by the London Mithraeum, which contains not only votive offerings and representations relating to the cult of Mithras, notably a marble relief showing Mithras slaying the astral bull, known as the Tauroctony, but also examples of the harmonious syncretist blend

of that cult with the traditional Roman state religion, represented by marble statues of Minerva, Mercury and Venus.

A particularly important aspect of the Roman state religion was the imperial cult, or emperor-worship. The imperial cult began as the worship only of deceased emperors who had been declared "divine" by the Roman senate. The Emperor Vespasian is said to have joked on his deathbed, *"Oh dear, I think I'm becoming a god."*[179] As time went by the imperial cult came to apply to living emperors as well. This was particularly the case in the eastern half of the Empire, where there was a tradition of worshipping living rulers which long predated the Roman Empire.

The Jews first came under Roman influence in 63 BCE, when the Roman general Pompey sacked the Temple in Jerusalem. Judaea as a whole finally came under direct Roman rule in 6 CE. In the ancient world, of course, communal religions were the rule. Every nation had its own god(s) and its own religion. But once a people was conquered by another state or nation it was expected to accept the religion of the conqueror as part of becoming absorbed into the conqueror's state and society. This is where the Jews differed from most of the other peoples conquered by Rome, most of whom had no difficulty in settling down after a while as obedient Roman subjects and worshippers of the Roman state religion, very often in harmonious combination with their own gods.

This path was simply not open to the Jews, who stuck doggedly to their own ancestral communal religion and, although conquered by Rome, remained aloof from the melting pot that was the Graeco-Roman Middle East. In short, the Jews continued to regard themselves as an independent nation and community with its own communal and religious institutions, and they were allowed a good deal of latitude by the Romans, who gave a free hand to the Jewish authorities, notably the High Priest and the so-called Great Sanhedrin, over a wide range of matters both religious and political.

By the time of the destruction of the Temple the Jews had been under direct or indirect Roman rule for 130 years, during which time they had not suffered any religious persecution. In fact, King Herod (73–4 BCE), who ruled over the Jews as a Roman client king, dying 70 years before the outbreak of the Jewish Revolt, had actually rebuilt the Temple on a grander scale than before as part of

a huge building programme throughout his kingdom, including the construction of the port at Caesarea and of fortresses at Masada and Herodium. None of this would have been allowed by the Romans if they had wanted to stamp out the Jewish religion. It was only in 66 CE when the Jews rose up in an attempt to overthrow the (actually very mild) Roman yoke that the Romans took military action against them. As the centre of Jewish life, the Temple naturally became the prime target.

The Roman state religion has had a bad press for a very long time in regard to persecution of the Jews. But even the destruction of the Temple, the centre of Jewish life, was not an act of religious persecution but a political and military response to a serious Jewish revolt against Roman rule.

That is why Johanan ben Zakai (30–90 CE), a leading Jewish rabbi, who was secretly smuggled into the Roman camp hidden in a coffin, managed to persuade Vespasian, who was at that time the Roman general in charge of putting down the Jewish Revolt of 66–70 CE, to allow him safe conduct to Yavneh and to establish a *yeshivah* or rabbinical seminary there on condition that it steered clear of politics. This enabled Yavneh to become a major centre of Jewish life, even to the point of becoming the seat of the Sanhedrin, or supreme religious court, after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Vespasian, who had by this time become Emperor (reigned 69–79 CE), clearly therefore had no objection to the exercise of the Jewish religion, only to Jewish refusal to knuckle down to Roman rule.

Christian tradition has long portrayed the Romans as serial persecutors of Christianity, and this theme has played into the hands of Hollywood, which has delighted in showing Christians thrown to the lions or as human torches in the Colosseum. However, recent research published by Candida Moss, Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Notre Dame University (a Catholic school), shows that *"The traditional history of martyrdom is a myth."* And again: *"The traditional history of Christian martyrdom is mistaken. Christians were not constantly persecuted, hounded or targeted by the Romans. Very few Christians died, and when they did, they were often executed for what we in the modern world would call political reasons."*[180] During the reign of the Emperor Diocletian (284–305) Christianity really *was* persecuted, but the tradition of

wholesale martyrdom over a period of three centuries is clearly largely fictitious.

Nevertheless, Christians and Christianity do appear to have been regarded by the Roman state with a certain amount of suspicion. The Roman attitude to Christianity was different from their attitude towards Judaism. Although the Jews living in Judea were under direct or indirect Roman rule, they were a self-contained community with its own customs, language — and of course religion. So, although the Jews were under Roman sovereignty they were never absorbed into Roman society and the Romans did not therefore expect them to take on the Roman religion either.

Christians, on the other hand, who from quite an early date were spread throughout the Roman world, were not a separate identifiable community, did not have their own language, and differed from the rank and file of the general population in one respect only: religion. They were just ordinary members of society in the Roman world, mostly living in the Greek-speaking eastern half of the Empire. However, from the Roman point of view the Christians could be viewed as dissidents or even as traitors because, although they did not form a distinctive community, they rejected the Roman state religion, which was part and parcel of being a member of Roman society.

The main problem that the Romans had with Christianity was the Christians' refusal to participate in emperor-worship, which was taken by the Roman state as a sign not only of religious defiance but also of disloyalty to the emperor and therefore treason.

## Case Study 3 — Christianity

The validity of the claims made by Christianity will be put through the wringer in Chapter 6. Here I just want to summarise briefly how this creed religion came into existence as a breakaway from a traditional communal religion. It is important to realise not only that Jesus himself lived and died a Jew but also that he regarded his mission as being essentially to the Jews.

Jesus is reported in Matthew's Gospel to have been approached by a Canaanite woman for urgent assistance with her daughter. Jesus at first waves her aside saying, *"I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of Israel."* When the woman came closer "and worshipped him", begging, "Lord, help me", he repeats the same point in an insulting manner: *"It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs."* "The children" clearly refers to the Jews, while Gentiles or non-Jews are described as "dogs". The point is not lost on the Canaanite woman, who remarks: "*Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from the master's table."* Needless to say, the story goes on, Jesus then relents and the woman's daughter is immediately healed.[181]

Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel Jesus is quoted as saying:

> Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.[182]

Far from wanting to abolish the requirements of Jewish law, Jesus is here portrayed as seeking to out-Pharisee the Pharisees.

The architect of Christianity was not Jesus but Paul, probably the greatest PR man in history, the self-styled *"apostle to the Gentiles*",[183]

who recognised that in order for his new religion to take off it had to attract non-Jews, and for *that* policy to succeed it would be necessary to free converts from the onerous obligations of Jewish law, including the dietary laws and above all circumcision.

It was over this that Paul had a major clash with the leaders of the so-called Jerusalem Church headed by Jesus's brother James. The turning point came at a meeting in 50 CE, about twenty years after Jesus's death, when Paul reported back to the so-called Jerusalem Council of the movement. After what appears to have been a heated debate, James settled the issue by deciding *"that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God"* except with the most basic Jewish obligations to abstain from idol-worship, from "unchastity" and from eating blood.[184]

Freed from its Jewish trammels, Christianity was now able to take off on its own as a creed religion. Circumcision, Paul preached, is irrelevant. "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love*."[185] A more conservative view is expressed in another of Paul's Epistles: *"For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumscision, but keeping the commandments of God."*[186] God, wrote Paul, *"will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith."*[187]

Instead of circumcision and other Jewish practices, the test for joining the new faith was simply acceptance of Jesus as the Christ — plus a growing body of dogma eventually formalised in the Nicene Creed adopted in 325 CE by the first ecumenical council. The Nicene Creed is the profession of faith that is still the most widely accepted in Christian liturgy today, but it has not prevented numerous doctrinal disputes, schisms, persecutions and even intra-Christian religious wars from taking place over the centuries.

## A Quick Glance at Some Other Religions

As we have seen, there is no shortage of evidence for the binary communal/creed classification of religions. But not all religions are easy to pigeon-hole in this way. Among the factors which muddy the waters are internal variations, syncretism, hybridisation, imperceptible historical changes and propaganda.

Let us just take a quick survey of religions that may pose a problem in terms of their classification:

- *Buddhism*: This is one of the great religions of the world, with between 350 million and 1.6 billion adherents. It is sometimes doubted, however, whether it is a religion at all, as it does not really include belief in a God but is instead based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, or "the awakened one". Does this make Buddhism a creed religion? In a sense, possibly, as may be seen, for example, from the "five precepts" of *ahimsa* (non-violence), refraining from theft, refraining from sexual and sensual misconduct, refraining from lying and refraining from alcohol and drugs. Unlike most other creed religions, Buddhism is not a proselytising religion and tends not to be intolerant of other religions but has the capacity to coexist harmoniously with other religions, notably in Japan.
- *Zoroastrianism*: An ancient monotheistic Iranian religion, which was the official state religion of Persia for about 1,350 years, from 705 BCE to 651 CE, when Persia was conquered by the Arabs. As a result of persecution at the hands of their Muslim rulers the majority of Zoroastrians moved to India, where they still exist as a community largely separate from their neighbours. Because of their Persian origin, instead of being termed Zoroastrians they are now called "Parsees" or "Parsis". Besides being monotheistic the religion is a communal religion typical of the ancient world, and it retains this quality today despite no longer having its own separate state. Like most communal religions, it has always been tolerant of other religions — so much so that after conquering the Neo-Babylonian Empire the Persian King Cyrus the Great

(reigned c. 560–530 BCE) issued an "edict of toleration" in the form of the famous cuneiform cylinder now housed in the British Museum in London in which he expressed reverence for the gods of his defeated enemies, notably Marduk, the chief god of Babylon.[188] Even more remarkably, Cyrus allowed the Jews, whose Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and who had been taken to Babylon as captives, to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.[189] This became the Second Temple, which survived from 535 BCE until its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE.

- *Yazidis*: Adherents of an ancient monotheistic Kurdish communal religion found mainly in the Nineveh Province of Iraqi Kurdistan. Although almost all of them speak Kurmanji Kurdish, the largest of the Kurdish languages, they tend to regard themselves as distinct from the Kurds and are recognised by the United Nations as a separate ethnic group. As is the case with most communal religions, their religious identity is subsumed under their communal identity — they are non-proselytising, tolerant and peace- loving. At the time of writing they have come into the news as targets of the self-styled "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant", ISIL or ISIS, who have reportedly threatened them with death unless they convert to Islam, as a result of which a number of Yazidi men have been killed and women and children abducted.

## Conclusion

In the ancient world, when communal religions prevailed, there were no wars of religion. Every nation had its own religion, which formed an integral part of its identity as a community. It would have been as unthinkable for, say, a Hittite to convert to the Jewish religion as it would have been for that Hittite to take on Jewish nationality, or vice versa. Communal religions tend therefore to be tolerant of other religions. There was no shortage of dynastic wars, wars of conquest and wars for other political or economic motives, but no religious wars. And it was only when one nation was conquered by another that religious conversion took place. The conquered people would be expected automatically to adopt their conquerors' religion when they became absorbed into their

conquerors' state and society.

Creed religions, by contrast, tend to be intolerant of one another and even of divergent branches of their own religion. In Christianity the persecution of "heretics" by the Roman Catholic Church over many centuries followed by the wars of religion of the 16th and 17th centuries are paralleled by the more recent conflicts between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims.

Religious conflicts often have political, ethnic or economic origins, but their expression in religious terms only exacerbates the hostility and makes an amicable solution all the harder to achieve.

So, what's the solution to all the religious rancour that we see around us today — including the New Atheists' hostility to religion in general? The first step must be to understand the true basis of the conflicts arising out of the intolerance of the various religious — and anti-religious — organisations concerned.

Communal religions tend to be more tolerant than creed religions, but the most tolerant "religion" of all is belief in an impersonal deist God. (See Chapter 3.) The great minds who have this kind of belief do not display the arrogance of either believers in a conventional personal theist God or of their detractors, the New Atheists. On the contrary, these great minds, like Einstein and Darwin, are exemplars of modesty and humility.

# *Review of Chapter Four*

- The belief peddled by Christopher Hitchens that "organized religion" as a whole is intolerant is incorrect. *Creed* religions have tended to be intolerant while *communal* religions are generally tolerant — and degrees of toleration have fluctuated over time.
- The classification of theistic religions into *communal religions* and *creed religions* is my own classification, which cuts across the conventional classifications.
- Why does the classification of religions matter? Chiefly in order to test whether there really is any correlation between a religion's classification and its degree of toleration both of other religions and also of other denominations and groupings within itself.
- Christianity and Islam are the two prime creed religions in the world today.
- Hinduism, Japanese Shinto and Judaism are essentially communal religions. In the ancient world communal religions, like the "pagan" Roman civic religion, were the norm.
- A creed religion is one which is based on a set of beliefs. Practically every creed religion — and every denomination, group or sect within each creed religion — tends to believe that it alone embodies the "truth" and holds the key to "salvation".
- Membership of a communal religion, by contrast, depends not on acceptance of any particular creed or set of beliefs but on membership of a nation, society or community. Communal religions were the norm in the ancient world. The Roman state religion is a good example. Until the advent of Christianity and other creed religions, everyone living in the Roman Empire was automatically a member of that religion by virtue of being a member of Roman society. That is why the Roman state religion does not even have a specific name. This is a

common feature of communal religions.

- Creed religions are generally eager to gain new converts. So missionary zeal and proselytism are high on their agenda.
- As beliefs are central to creed religions, the slightest variation in belief can result in other religions or groups within the same religion being branded as heretics or infidels. Creed religions therefore tend to be *intolerant* of other religions and even of other groups within their own religion. The conflict between Catholics and Protestants is a prime example, as is that between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims.
- Communal religions are generally vague and flexible in terms of belief. As a result, they are largely *tolerant* of other religions and of variations within their own religion. Recent research has shown that the tradition of Roman persecution of Christianity is a myth. It is important to note that there have never been any religious wars between communal religions.
- Because a communal religion does not have an existence separate from that of the community, there is no drive to make converts. In the ancient world every nation had its own religion. There was no desire on the part of any nation to convert members of any other nation to its religion any more than to its nationality. Neither Judaism nor Hinduism nor Shinto is a proselytising religion. Quite the opposite in fact.
- The only time a person in the ancient world would change their religion was as a result of conquest. If your nation was conquered by another, you would become absorbed into the conquering nation — and automatically into its religion at the same time.
- The belief peddled by atheists that all religions are intolerant is false. Creed religions generally *are* intolerant, but communal religions are largely tolerant.
- These features are confirmed by the case studies of Hinduism, the Roman state religion and Christianity and the further quick surveys of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and the Yazidi religion at the end of the chapter.
- Would the world be a more peaceful place if communal religions again prevailed? Wars of religion might disappear

but wars for political or economic reasons would be as frequent as ever. And even when creed religions go to war with one another in the name of religion this is often caused by other factors, usually political or economic.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## *Judaism: A Religion at the Crossroads*

Judaism began as a communal religion but has now become something of a hybrid between a communal and a creed religion. Instead of the tolerance which is a typical feature of communal religions, certain Jewish denominations now display intolerance especially towards certain other Jewish denominations. As a result, Judaism has become more fragmented than ever. And certain denominations even apply a creed test, which is alien to communal religions generally but typical of creed religions. Hence the pun in the title that I have given this chapter: orthodox Judaism must decide whether it is to add creed as a new test of membership, making it a hybrid between a communal and a creed religion, with the worst features of both.

## Judaism as a Communal Religion

Judaism began life about three thousand years ago as a *communal religion.* (See Chapter 4.) Most religions in the ancient world were of this type, in which religion and society were one. Jews have never had a distinct religious identity separate from their communal identity.

In common with most other communal religions, the Jewish religion has never even had a distinctive name separate from that of the nation. The English words "Jew" and "Judaism" are a modern coinage based on "Judah", the name of one of the twelve tribes and of one of the two Jewish kingdoms of antiquity. But in the Bible the label tends to be "the Children of Israel" (often translated as "Israelites"), and the term "Hebrews" is also found. At no point did the religion have a distinctive name of its own separate from that of the nation.

Like most other communal religions, ancient Judaism had a hereditary priestly class (made up of two groups: priests proper, in Hebrew *cohanim*, and their assistants known as *levi'im*, or in English as "levites"), which was in charge of the religious side of life based in the Temple in Jerusalem. Ritual was central to Jewish religious life, as is clear from the Hebrew Bible, which goes into minute detail on the animal sacrifices required for every eventuality, and also on the precise vestments to be worn by the priests.

There is practically nothing in the Hebrew Bible that can be called a creed, except for prohibition of idol worship and strong emphasis on belief in the One Jewish God who is portrayed as the Creator of the universe and at the same time as having singled out the Jewish people for special favour (and also for punishment for their transgressions). Hence the label attached to the Jews both by themselves and in a sneering tone by their detractors as "the Chosen People".

Even belief in an afterlife was not shared by all Jews. It hardly figures in the Hebrew Bible, and it is certainly not held out as promising reward or punishment for an adherent's conduct in their earthly life. The Book of Job, for example, where such promises

might have been expected to be found, contains not a single mention of life after death. Job's undeserved suffering, together with his acceptance and resignation, is rewarded instead with very earthly gifts:

> And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house; and they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold. And the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she-asses. He had also seven sons and three daughters… And after this Job lived a hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, four generations. And Job died, an old man, and full of days.[190]

What then of the well-known verse which is particularly memorable because of Handel's haunting musical setting of it in his *Messiah*? The verse in question reads as follows: *"For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth."*[191] The Christian interpretation of this verse is that it refers to resurrection and that the "redeemer" is Jesus.[192]

There are two main reasons for rejecting this view. First, it is flatly contradicted by the passage quoted above, which shows that Job's "redemption" came in purely earthly terms. Secondly, the word translated here as "redeemer" is the Hebrew word *goel*, which can also be translated as "avenger" or "champion". So, for example, in the book of Isaiah God is called the "redeemer of Israel" for redeeming the Jewish people from captivity. *Goel* can even be translated as "kinsman", whose duty it is to "redeem" a relation from slavery[193] or to marry his late brother's widow in a so-called "levirate marriage".[194] In short, therefore, the word "redeemer" has no necessary mystical or otherworldly connotations.

**Conversion**

Like most other communal religions, in ancient times the Jewish

religion was tolerant of other religions and was not interested in converting non-Jews to Judaism. The pattern in the ancient world was for each nation to have its own religion and its own god or gods. It would have been as unthinkable for an Egyptian, a Philistine or an Assyrian to convert to the Jewish religion as it would have been for them to switch to Jewish nationality.

Conversion hardly figures in the Hebrew Bible at all. There are just four episodes in the whole Old Testament that have any possible relevance to conversion at all.

**Ruth's Conversion to Judaism**

The prime incident, and the only one that can truly be regarded as an example of a conversion, occurs in the Book of Ruth. Set in the period of the Judges (around 1150 BCE), the Book of Ruth tells the probably fictitious story of a Jewish family, Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons, who during a famine migrate from Bethlehem in Judah to the nearby Kingdom of Moab. The two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. After the death of all the menfolk, Naomi decides to return to her native Judah, accompanied by her two Moabite daughters-in-law. Naomi begs the two young women to go back to their own families in Moab and remarry. Orpah does so, but Ruth is determined to stay in Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth's declaration of loyalty to Naomi is one of the most moving passages in the Bible:

> Entreat me not to leave you,
> Or to turn back from following after you;
> For wherever you go, I will go;
> And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
> Your people shall be my people,
> And your God, my God.
>
> Where you die, I will die,
> And there will I be buried.
> The LORD do so to me, and more also,
> If anything but death parts you and me.[195]

The key to this declaration is contained in the words, *"Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God."* This effectively encapsulates the essence of the nature of a communal religion. Ruth recognises that by choosing to join her mother-in-law Naomi in

Naomi's country, Judah, Ruth is not primarily changing her religion but her nationality. By choosing to join the Jewish people she also automatically joins the Jewish religion. Note that there is no mention whatsoever of any religious creed other than belief in Naomi's "God".

Once Ruth is converted by means of this informal but moving declaration she is fully accepted as Jewish in every respect, and according to the Book of Ruth was the great-grandmother of King David. This would make Ruth an ancestress of the Messiah, who according to Jewish tradition must be of the House of David.

**Ezra and the Foreign Wives**

The charming but almost certainly fictitious story of Ruth contrasts markedly with the probably brutally true historical episode associated with the name of Ezra in the canonical biblical book of the same name. Probably in about 457 BCE Ezra, a Jewish priest, led a large body of Jewish exiles from Babylon back to Jerusalem, where he re-established Jewish observance among the Jews who had already returned from exile.

Ezra was shocked to discover that many of these Jews had taken non-Jewish wives, including Canaanite, Hittite, Perizzite, Jebusite, Ammonite, Moabite, Egyptian and Amorite women.[196] He immediately invoked the injunction against such foreign marriages contained in the Book of Deuteronomy and issued a proclamation requiring all returned exiles to assemble in Jerusalem on pain of forfeiture of their property and exclusion.[197] Ezra then shamed the men concerned into putting away their foreign wives and the children that these foreign wives had borne them. The Book of Ezra even contains a list of the Jewish priests, levites and leading Jewish citizens concerned.[198] The Book of Ezra ends with this verse: *"All these had married foreign women, and they put them away with their children."*[199]

Here is the Deuteronomic injunction against foreign marriageswhich Ezra invoked:

> You shall not make marriages with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons. For they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord would

> be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire.[200]

Although Deuteronomy (literally, "second law") was purportedly a code of laws issued by Moses at the time of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt, it was probably actually compiled several centuries later, during the reign of King Josiah (641–609 BCE), who was determined to extirpate from the Temple in Jerusalem and all around his kingdom the worship of Baal and other foreign gods which had been introduced by Josiah's grandfather, King Manasseh.

**The Rape of Dinah**

A highly discreditable example of pretended conversion occurs in the story in Genesis of the rape of Dinah, daughter of the patriarch Jacob. Jacob had bought some land from Hamor, a Canaanite prince, and pitched his tent there. Hamor's son Shechem raped Dinah and then asked his father to approach Dinah's father for her hand in marriage.

Hamor's proposal was not only for his son Shechem to marry Dinah but also for a more general arrangement: *"Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You shall dwell with us; and the land shall be open to you; dwell and trade in it, and get property in it."*[201]

Dinah's brothers knew of her rape by Shechem but pretended to agree to his father's proposition on condition that all their menfolk were circumcised: *"Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male of you be circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters to ourselves, and we will dwell with you and become one people."*[202]

Hamor and Shechem readily agreed and all their menfolk were duly circumcised. But, when they were writhing in agony on the third day after the operation, two of Dinah's brothers secretly crept in on them and killed them all.[203]

The key phrase in the pretended agreement is *"we will dwell with you and become one people"*. The story of Dinah is probably fictitious, but what we have in this phrase is the typical communal attitude to religion as an integral part of a person's social or

national identity. As we saw in the case of Ruth, joining the Jewish people entails joining the Jewish religion; and the Jewish religion requires male circumcision. The only surprise in this regard in the Dinah story is that the pretended intention was for the Jewish people to join that of Hamor, not the other way round.

**Jonah's Non-Proselytising Mission**

The story of Jonah might have been expected to promote conversion to Judaism, but it does nothing of the kind. The Book of Jonah is almost certainly a parable with no pretence to being a factual historical narrative.

The Book begins with God instructing Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, to preach repentance to the people living there. To the Jews of the ancient world Nineveh was the equivalent of Nazi Germany to the Jews of today. Not surprisingly, therefore, Jonah is unwilling to accept this mission, because he does not want to help the Ninevites to escape divine retribution. It is in his attempt to run away from God that Jonah boards a ship bound for "Tarshish", probably Tartessus in southern Spain, in exactly the opposite direction from Nineveh. It is on this voyage that the well-known episode involving the whale (or "big fish", to be precise) occurs. God catches up with Jonah and churns up a great storm at sea, which results in Jonah's fellow passengers blaming him and throwing him overboard, where he is swallowed by a "big fish" and eventually vomited out on dry land.

God now repeats his instruction to Jonah to go and preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, who were supposedly guilty of evil and violence. Jonah reluctantly obeys, preaching, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be destroyed." To Jonah's chagrin, his message is successful. The King of Nineveh (a fictitious character) proclaims a general fast, covers himself in sackcloth and ashes and orders his people to do the same.

The Ninevites' genuine repentance stirs God to relent, and Nineveh is spared the threatened destruction. Jonah is so angry about God's mercy to the people of Nineveh — the sworn enemy of the Jews — that he sulks and even asks to die. But through the parable of the gourd God brings it home to Jonah that God must concern himself not only with the Jews but with the people of Nineveh as well, who are just as much part of God's creation as the

Jewish people.

The message of the Book of Jonah is a universalist one: God judges people on their merits and not in terms of which nation, people or religion they belong to. There is no suggestion in the Book of Jonah that the people of Nineveh need to convert to Judaism in order to be saved, and there is no mention of conversion or indeed of Judaism in Jonah's message to them.

If Jonah were to be translated to a modern setting, the first questions to ask would be: Why has Jonah been sent on this mission? To what religion or cult do the Ninevites have to sign up in order to be saved? And who is paying for Jonah's campaign anyway?

However, unlike Paul's preaching to communities dotted all around the Graeco-Roman world — a campaign which was unabashedly geared to winning recruits for his fledgling new Christian religion — Jonah's mission has no ulterior motive. Not a word is said about the Ninevites' own gods, although the historical Assyrians did of course have a pantheon of gods, including Marduk, Ishtar (or Astarte), Tammuz (who gave his name to one of the months of the Babylonian calendar still used in the Jewish religion) and Ashur (presumably named after "Assyria"), who was still being worshipped as late as the 4th century CE.

Whenever the Book of Jonah was written, which is unclear, it undoubtedly dates from a time when communal religions were the order of the day and every nation had its own god or gods. When Jonah tries to escape his mission to Nineveh by boarding a ship heading in the opposite direction, the ship is soon caught up in a huge storm sent by God. We read: *"Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god."*[204] The sailors then cast lots to discover who is to blame for the storm. *"So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah."* Whereupon the sailors round on Jonah and ask him: *"What is your occupation? And whence do you come? What is your country? And of what people are you?"*[205] Three of these four questions are essentially the same, asking Jonah about his nationality. None are specifically about religion, because in an age of communal religions a person's religion was determined by their nationality. But Jonah's answer does refer to his religion: *"I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*[206] Jonah is

here making the point that his nation's god is not just another communal god but is also the creator of the world. After throwing Jonah overboard at his own request, we read: *"Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows."*[207]

Does this mean that the sailors convert to Judaism? Clearly not. But they obviously recognise the power of Jonah's god and show him due respect. This may well be a clue to the purpose behind the Book of Jonah — to demonstrate that the Jewish God is not just another communal deity but also has a universal dimension.

Further pointers in the same direction can be identified in the main body of the Jonah story. Jonah's message to the people of Nineveh is a simple one: repent or be destroyed. There is no mention of the Jewish religion or of conversion. In decreeing a total fast complete with sackcloth and ashes the king of Nineveh orders his people to *"cry mightily to God; yea, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?"*[208]

The king recognises the power of "God" — i.e. the Jewish God — and directs his people to address their entreaties not to any of their own gods but to this universal Jewish God, but without any question of conversion to Judaism.

The same message is hammered home in the last part of the Book, where Jonah rails against God for causing the withering away of a gourd which God had given him to provide shade from the searing heat. A parallel is drawn between the gourd and the people of Nineveh. God reproves Jonah for his pity for the plant *"for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"*[209]

The message of the Book of Jonah is ultimately a message of toleration addressed to the Jews: remember that the Lord is not only the Jewish national god but also the creator of the universe, who cares just as much for his non-Jewish creatures as for the Jews. You don't need to be Jewish in order to earn God's favour.

This is a slightly different message from the more usual communal religion view that, though we may well regard our God as superior to your gods, we recognise that each nation has its own religion and we will not try to wean you away from your gods — unless of course they enter our country and try to attract our people away from our god. The best Biblical example of that situation is the famous competition between the Jewish prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal and Asherah, whose worship had been introduced into the Kingdom of Israel by Jezebel, the Phoenician wife of King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Elijah throws down a challenge to the people of Israel: *"How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him."* Needless to say, the Jewish God wins the competition.[210]

Both of these communal religion messages are a million miles away from the typical creed religion message, which is a call to conversion with a promise of salvation for converts and a threat of damnation for those who refuse to convert, as in: *"He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him*."[211]

**Jewish Disunity**

The absence of any suggestion of conversion in the Book of Jonah is surprising only in the light of Christianity and other creed religions. As the product of a purely communal religion, the Book of Jonah would not be expected to advocate, or even refer to, conversion to Judaism.

Like most other communal religions and *unlike* most creed religions, Judaism was never a proselytising religion. That remains the position today. Orthodox Judaism positively discourages prospective converts. The modern Conservative, Progressive, Liberal and Reform wings of Judaism are more welcoming, though even they do not proselytise, and the conversion process is never instant as it sometimes can be with creed religions. Conversion by means of a sprinkling of a few drops of "holy" water or by the recitation of a one-sentence pledge (as in certain Christian denominations) is just not a possibility for the prospective convert to Judaism, who would instead need to attend and pay for a training course, adopt kosher eating habits and, in the rare cases of orthodox conversions, would be required to live with an orthodox family for a period of months.

And then, in the case of males, there is the added pain and indignity of having to be subjected to a surgical mutilation of the flesh.

The difference in attitudes to conversion is just one of many disagreements between Jewish groups today and contrasts markedly with the situation in the ancient world. Two thousand years ago Judaism was divided into several sects or denominations, notably Pharisees and Sadducees. However, as long as the Temple stood (i.e. until 70 CE), it remained the focus of Jewish religious life, and Jews of every stripe worshipped there.

Though these religious differences were major, nobody was persecuted (or even prosecuted) for heresy, and there was no such thing as excommunication — until the rabbis took control of the religion after the destruction of the Temple. *Herem* or *cherem*, the term used for "excommunication", is found in the Hebrew Bible, where, however, it does not refer to any punishment inflicted on Jews but only to the total annihilation of a foreign enemy purportedly at God's command, as for example in Joshua's destruction of Jericho, sparing only the family of Rahab the harlot, who had hidden Joshua's spies.[212]

However, rabbinical *cherem*, or excommunication, was used against fellow-Jews — I say "was" because it was largely given up when local Jewish communities ceased to have direct control over their members and Jews were integrated into the broader non-Jewish population in whose midst they lived.

The high degree of tolerance that existed among Jews while the Temple still stood — albeit not always very cordial — is typical of communal religions, which by their very nature are inclusive of all members of their own community while remaining exclusive as far as outsiders are concerned.

Today, however, each Jewish denomination has its own synagogues, its own services (which vary quite considerably from one to another), its own clergy (who do not enjoy automatic mutual recognition) and even its own rabbinical courts, the more orthodox of which do not recognise the conversions made by other less orthodox denominations. Some of the more "progressive" denominations have female rabbis and cantors, while orthodox synagogues adhere firmly to the tradition of male-only clergy and do not even allow men and women to sit together during services.

Women are banished to an upstairs gallery, which, in the most orthodox synagogues, is curtained off so that they cannot be seen by the menfolk sitting in the main body of the synagogue downstairs.

This diversification within Judaism is a comparatively recent development, largely the product of the Enlightenment of the 18th century and of Jewish emancipation in the early 19th century, which led to increasing Jewish assimilation into the non-Jewish population. It was essentially under these influences that the Jewish Reform movement came into existence in Germany and Britain in the 1840s. However, this diversification has developed into fragmentation and mutual intolerance.

**Jewish Intolerance of Other Jews**

Besides being reluctant to convert new members itself, orthodox Judaism does not recognise conversions made by other Jewish denominations, even those made by conservative rabbis, whose outlook and attitudes differ very little from those of the orthodox rabbis themselves.

The so-called "Stanmore Accords" signed in November 1998 by the lay leaders of the orthodox United Synagogue, the conservative Masorti Synagogues, the Liberal and Progressive Synagogues and the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain has done nothing to heal the rifts in the Jewish community of the United Kingdom. After an initial statement lamenting in vague terms the damage caused by "in-fighting and mutual recrimination", the signatories lamely add that they "*wish the annexed conventions of Orthodox communities which are adopted by the United Synagogue to be widely known and recognized*". These "conventions" are not agreed, and it is easy to see why, as they include the bald statement that *"Orthodox authorities do not recognise Reform, Liberal or Masorti conversions."*[213]

The factual position in Britain today was clearly stated by Rabbi Yitzchak Schochet, chairman of the orthodox United Synagogue's Rabbinical Council, in 2009: *"Reform and Liberal conversions are generally not accepted by Orthodox and Masorti movements. Masorti conversions cannot be accepted by Orthodox. The only one that is acceptable throughout is Orthodox conversion."*[214] *Masorti* (literally, "traditional") is the name given to Conservative Judaism outside North America.

Ironically enough, this unharmonious picture contrasts sharply with that prevailing in Christianity today, in which the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian Churches recognise one another's baptism. The Catholic Church also recognises baptism by the Eastern Orthodox Church, which in turn generally recognises baptism by other denominations provided they baptise in the name of the Trinity. The major Christian denominations that remain outside this framework are the Pentecostal or Charismatic movement (who baptise only in the name of Jesus, as the doctrine of the Trinity only arose in the 2nd century CE), the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

**The Rabbi Louis Jacobs Saga**

One of the ugliest chapters in the history of British Jewry concerns the intolerance of orthodox Judaism towards the Masorti conservative wing of the religion. It all started with the supposed "heresy" of Dr Louis Jacobs, a highly respected traditional orthodox rabbi who in 1961 was invited to become the principal of what was then called Jews' College, the main orthodox rabbinical seminary in Britain. Important though it was in its own right, the position of principal of Jews' College was a launching pad to the post of chief rabbi, to which Louis Jacobs was widely expected to be appointed after the retirement of the then incumbent, Rabbi Israel Brodie. But before Louis Jacobs could take up the offered headship of Jews' College, his appointment was blocked by Chief Rabbi Brodie on the ground of heretical views expressed by Louis Jacobs in a book called *We Have Reason to Believe*, published in 1957.[215] The book was far from being a revolutionary tract but disagreed with the usual orthodox rabbinical view that the Five Books of Moses were dictated in their entirety by God to Moses. Instead Jacobs adopted the so-called "Wellhausen Hypothesis" (named after a 19th century German Christian theologian), which saw the biblical text as a human compilation drawn from several different sources.

Though as we have seen the very idea of heresy would have been alien to the Judaism of the ancient world, which, despite its division into several mutually hostile sects or groupings, never led to the exclusion of any Jew from the Temple service, yet Louis Jacobs's "heresy" in modern Britain sparked off a chain reaction which has already lasted half a century.

With his appointment as principal of Jews' College vetoed by the Chief Rabbi in 1963, Louis Jacobs tried to return to his pulpit at London's prestigious New West End Synagogue, from which he had resigned in 1960 to become a tutor at Jews' College. The synagogue's board of management wanted Louis Jacobs back, but this too was blocked. The board was informed by the United Synagogue (the controlling body of which the synagogue was a constituent member) that Louis Jacobs no longer had a "ministerial practicing certificate" and could not be appointed. The synagogue's board of management refused to be cowed and duly invited Rabbi Jacobs to occupy their pulpit on two consecutive weeks in April 1964. The United Synagogue then retaliated by removing the synagogue's elected board of management and placing it under the control of a committee of three nominated by the United Synagogue.

A large number of Louis Jacobs's supporters promptly resigned from the New West End Synagogue and established a new congregation of their own with Louis Jacobs as its rabbi. Although Louis Jacobs was essentially a regular orthodox rabbi, his ouster by the Chief Rabbi and the United Synagogue resulted in this new congregation being designated not as orthodox but as Masorti ("traditional") and associated with American Conservative Judaism.[216]

But this was not the end of the Louis Jacobs saga. In 2003, nearly 40 years after the "Jacobs Affair", Louis Jacobs's "heresy" was dredged up yet again and thrown in his face. When Rabbi Jacobs's granddaughter was about to be married in Bournemouth, the local synagogue, which was affiliated to the United Synagogue, was prevented from offering him the standard honour accorded to a bride's relatives of being called up to the reading of the Torah (the Law) and reciting a short blessing. Once again, the veto came from the United Synagogue. It was reported in the press that Rabbi Sacks, the then Chief Rabbi, and the head of the London Beth Din (rabbinical court), justified the veto on the ground that *"they believed that had Jacobs uttered the words 'Our God… who gave us the Torah of truth…', he would have made a false statement."*[217]

**Jewish Free School Lawsuit**

Even Louis Jacobs's death in 2006 did not put an end to this

intolerance. On the contrary, the saga culminated in a lawsuit that was the subject of a ruling by Britain's Supreme Court in 2009.[218] In 2007 a Jewish father applied for his son to be accepted as a pupil at London's Jewish Free School ("JFS"), a state school which was allowed to favour Jewish applicants over non-Jews. The policy of the school was *"to admit up to the standard admissions number children who are recognized as being Jewish by the Office of the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of the Commonwealth (OCR) or who have already enrolled upon or who have undertaken, with the consent of their parents, to follow any course of conversion to Judaism under the approval of the OCR."*[219]

Although the boy's father was Jewish by birth, the rabbinical test of Jewishness depends not on the father but on the mother, who has to be either a natural-born Jewess or a convert to Judaism — provided her conversion is recognised by the United Synagogue. This was where the problem lay, because the boy's mother (who, as it happens, was actually a teacher at JFS), an Italian Roman Catholic by birth, had been converted to Judaism by a Masorti rabbi in Israel — a conversion which was not recognised by the Office of the Chief Rabbi. The fact that the boy's father was Jewish, that the boy lived a totally Jewish life and wore a skullcap at all times was regarded as irrelevant. All that mattered was that the mother was not recognised as being Jewish, so the boy was likewise regarded as non-Jewish and was therefore denied admission to the school.

The curious decision of the United Kingdom Supreme Court was that the boy had been unlawfully discriminated against on grounds of race. But the real reason for the discrimination was non-recognition of a Masorti conversion. As a communal religion Judaism might be expected to take an inclusive view of all Jews and not practise discrimination against adherents of non-orthodox Jewish denominations on grounds of belief. That is something that a creed religion like Christianity or Islam can be expected to do, but if it is done by a communal religion it threatens the communal underpinning of that religion without enabling it to expand by conversion, because, as we have seen, communal religions tend not to proselytise, or even to welcome converts.

**Reform Judaism**

This discrimination against the Masorti is by no means the only example of intra-Jewish intolerance. In his book titled *One People?* Chief Rabbi Sacks wrote: *"Reform Jews are Jews, but Reform Judaism is not Judaism."*[220] The death of the well-known Reform Rabbi Hugo Gryn in 1996 brought to the fore tensions between the Orthodox and Reform wings of Judaism. Chief Rabbi Sacks did not attend Rabbi Gryn's funeral, for which he was criticised by Reform Jews, but he did attend memorial prayers for Hugo Gryn, earning the ire of some ultra-orthodox Jews. In order to placate this criticism Sacks wrote (in Hebrew) in a private letter to an ultra-orthodox leader (which was soon leaked) that Hugo Gryn had been "among those who destroy the faith" as part of a "false grouping". He explained the reason for his attendance at a memorial service for Rabbi Gryn as *"to avoid giving the Reform movement a reason for appointing its own chief rabbi"* and assured his correspondent that the recognition that he had shown Rabbi Gryn was *"not as a Reform rabbi but as a survivor of the Holocaust*".[221]

**"No one creed has a monopoly of spiritual truth"**

Ironically enough, Sacks has appeared more tolerant of non-Jewish religions than of other Jewish groupings. In his book *The Dignity of Difference* published in 2002 Sacks remarked that, *"In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims",* and, *"No one creed has a monopoly of spiritual truth."* These views, which are typical of communal religions and chime in quite well with the message of the Book of Jonah discussed above, were roundly condemned as "heretical" by a number of orthodox rabbis, resulting in Sacks quickly issuing a new version of his book with the offending passages severely toned down. The remark that "*No one creed has a monopoly of spiritual truth"* was simply deleted.[222] A leading Jerusalem rabbi attacked the book as containing views "*contrary to our faith in the Holy Torah"* and therefore unfit to be brought into the home. And even Rabbi Sacks's own rabbinical court in London stated that parts of the original version of the book were open to *"an interpretation which was inconsistent with basic Jewish beliefs"*.[223] When asked by a student at an address at the Oxford Union why he had revised the book, it was reported that *"Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks has acknowledged that he would have had to resign if he had not amended his award-winning book on inter-faith*

*tolerance,* The Dignity of Difference."[224]

Judaism Developing Features of a Creed Religion?

What are these "basic Jewish beliefs"? As an essentially communal religion Judaism has no established or official set of beliefs or principles of faith. Maimonides's Thirteen Principles are accorded a good deal of respect and are recited in most Jewish religious services, but they were only formulated in the 12th century CE, so are not really very ancient in terms of Jewish history. Also, they are a compilation of Maimonides's personal beliefs and therefore include some beliefs that are not shared by all Jews. Among these are the following beliefs:

- The Pentateuch (the first five books of the Jewish Bible) was dictated to Moses by God;
- The coming of the Jewish Messiah;
- The resurrection of the dead.

There is no religious "test" for Jews and there is no compulsion to accept any particular set of beliefs. However, as we have seen in connection with the accusations of "heresy" levelled against Rabbi Louis Jacobs and more recently against Chief Rabbi Sacks himself, Judaism seems to be developing more and more features of a creed religion, with orthodox and ultra-orthodox rabbis identifying the religion with beliefs such as:

- The superiority of Judaism over all other religions;
- The divine authorship of the Pentateuch (the Five Books of Moses);
- Divine authorship of the "Oral Law" as well as of the written law;
- The literal truth of the Jewish Bible.

The idea that God dictated the Pentateuch, or Five Books of Moses, to Moses on Mount Sinai is difficult enough to accept. Moses must have been a very fast shorthand writer indeed! But the belief that Moses received the "Oral Law" as well places just too much of a strain on credibility. The fact that the "Oral Law" only surfaced in written form in the shape of the Talmud many centuries later shows that the contents of these rabbinic compilations date from a period

long after the destruction of the Temple when the rabbis had taken over the religion.

Acceptance of these extreme positions as core Jewish beliefs inevitably makes Judaism more intolerant than it was in ancient times and also more intolerant than is normally the case with communal religions. Hence the title of this chapter. Judaism is now at the cross-roads between remaining a true communal religion and becoming a hybrid between a communal and a creed religion resulting in the worst features of both.

**Cheating God**

Some of the rabbinic injunctions are so pettifogging as to be amusing. Rabbinic law insists on strict observance of some extremely literal interpretations of Biblical commandments. For example, the injunction in the Ten Commandments against working on the Sabbath is interpreted as including a prohibition on the carrying of any object from one house or "precinct" to another. The rabbis then ingeniously got around this awkward problem — which was entirely of their own making — by allowing the construction of an *eruv*, or ritual enclosure, often made simply of a few strands of wire, connecting different premises together to create a virtual single precinct, within which carrying was now permissible! The idea that God could be cheated in this way is only slightly less ludicrous than the idea that God had decreed that even a prayer book could not be carried in public on the Sabbath in the first place.

**The Worst of Both Worlds**

If Judaism is to be burdened with the need to accept fundamentalist beliefs such as these, then intolerance will have captured the very heart of the religion. This rotten heart is the worst feature of creed religions but there is absolutely no need for it to infect communal religions, which are mostly free from it.

Judaism is now quite literally at the *cross*roads. By burdening itself with pettifogging beliefs Judaism is in danger of going down the road of a creed religion like Christianity while lacking Christianity's great strengths, namely ease of conversion and undemanding practices. By contrast, orthodox Judaism combines pettifogging beliefs and elaborate rules with a negative attitude

towards conversion.

Judaism, the oldest and by far the smallest of the three main monotheistic religions, is in a more precarious position than either Christianity or Islam. Today Judaism is more divided than ever, conversions are discouraged by most orthodox authorities, and some of the most orthodox denominations even refuse to recognise the state of Israel. The long-term future of Israel is seriously under threat, and there is no sign of reconciliation among the fragmented Jewish groups around the world.

This fragmentation and mutual hostility of the different Jewish sects in the modern world is not the sort of thing we would expect of a communal religion. Because communal religions do not normally have a fixed set of beliefs, they generally cannot and do not label anyone as a heretic. However, Judaism is no longer a typical communal religion in this regard.

The internal fissures suffered by Judaism in the modern world resemble the splits typically found in creed religions, like that between Catholics and Protestants or between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims. But the weakness Judaism suffers as a result of this fragmentation is exacerbated by the reluctance of orthodox rabbis to allow conversion to Judaism and their refusal to recognise conversions performed by non-orthodox rabbis. As a result, Judaism's small size (with its main growth deriving ironically from the high birthrate of the ultra-orthodox) places it at a severe disadvantage in a world in which success is increasingly a numbers game.

**Israeli Irony**

The final irony is that Israel, the only Jewish state in the world, is not helped in this numbers game by the high birthrate of the ultra-orthodox community in its midst, which at the time of writing accounts for about 10% of the population and is expected to grow to more than 20% of Israel's Jewish population by the year 2028. In March 2014 a law was passed ending the exemption from military service enjoyed by thousands of ultra-orthodox seminary students, though it remains to be seen how effectively the law can be enforced. Moreover, some of the ultra-orthodox groupings are overtly hostile to the very existence of a Jewish state on the ground that the Messiah has not yet come! Some ultra-orthodox rabbis have

even been prepared to join Israel's bitterest enemy, Iran, in condemning Israel and in denying the Holocaust.

At the time of writing Israel defines itself as a "Jewish and democratic" state, but the government of Benjamin Netanyahu wishes to change that to "the national homeland of the Jewish people", which is in effect an attempt to return to the communal model of ancient times.[225] But this will undoubtedly be strongly resisted, because at present Israel allows Christians and Muslims to enjoy full citizenship. At the time of writing Israeli Muslims already account for about 20.7% of the population of Israel (not counting the West Bank or the Gaza strip) and have a far higher birthrate than the Israeli Jews.

As an essentially communal religion Judaism *should* be tolerant of other religions, and Israeli Muslims have full rights of citizenship and even their own political parties. But, with the high Muslim birthrate, this leaves Israel vulnerable to takeover by its own Muslim Arab citizens. In short, Judaism is in a much weaker position than the two main communal religions in the world today, Indian Hinduism and Japanese Shinto. (See Chapters 4 and 7.)

It is no doubt in order to reverse this trend that Netanyahu's "Jewish State Bill" has been put forward, but it appears unlikely to succeed.

# *Review of Chapter Five*

- Judaism began life about three thousand years ago as a communal religion.
- It had a priestly class but no clear-cut creed or belief in an afterlife, or even a distinctive name.
- Ancient Judaism was tolerant of other religions and was not interested in converting non-Jews to Judaism.
- There are only four episodes in the Hebrew Bible with any possible relevance to conversion. These concern: Ruth, Ezra, Dinah and Jonah — and of these only Ruth can be considered as a case of conversion.
- Can the Jewish hostility to the Amalekites be regarded as a religious conflict or as a purely national and political one? The latter seems more likely as far as Biblical times are concerned, but there is a problem with the fact that three of the 613 commandments still supposedly incumbent on Jews today relate to the Amalekites.
- As long as the second Temple stood (i.e. until 70 CE), all Jews were allowed to worship there and there was toleration across all Jewish denominations, despite the major differences between them.
- In modern times, however, Jewish diversification has developed into fragmentation and mutual intolerance.
- One of the ugliest chapters in the history of British Jewry is the "Rabbi Louis Jacobs saga" concerning the intolerance of orthodox Judaism towards the "Masorti" (conservative) wing of the religion.
- The basis of this intolerance was doctrinal: Rabbi Jacobs had expressed a "heretical" view.
- Reform, Liberal, Progressive and Masorti conversions are not recognised by the Orthodox United Synagogue in Britain.
- In 1993 Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks went so far as to write:

"*Reform Jews are Jews, but Reform Judaism is not Judaism*."

- However, Chief Rabbi Sacks adopted a more tolerant attitude towards non-Jewish religions, writing in *Dignity of Difference* published in 2002: "*No one creed has a monopoly of spiritual truth*" — a typical communal religion attitude of toleration. However, this remark was deleted when Sacks was faced with criticism from a number of orthodox rabbis.
- In general, British orthodox Judaism has moved a step closer to becoming a hybrid between a communal and a creed religion.
- Although this move towards hybridisation is a recent development, there are some much older precedents, such as Maimonides's "Thirteen Principles of Faith" compiled in the 12th century CE, which, although generally recited in the synagogue service, has never reached the status of a creed or a religious "test".
- Besides developing something of a creed, orthodox Judaism has long adopted highly literal interpretations of practical commandments, notably the prohibition of work on the Sabbath, which has come to be used as a test of orthodoxy.
- These features have turned Judaism into something of a hybrid combining the worst of both worlds — with the internal fissures of a creed religion coupled with the numerical weakness resulting from the typical aversion of communal religions to conversion.
- These problems have impacted on Israel so as to weaken it.
- But there is no reason to think that if Israel didn't exist the various Islamic states in the area would be likely to coexist harmoniously.

# CHAPTER SIX

## *Is Christianity True?*

As a creed religion Christianity, and every individual Christian denomination or grouping, claims a monopoly of "the truth", acceptance of which vouchsafes "salvation" to its adherents. This belief manifested itself in intolerance of other religions and also in the persecution of some Christian groups by other Christian groups. Most branches of Christianity are now much more tolerant of other religions and of one another than ever before, without however giving up their claim to have a lock on "the truth". But is there any truth to the Christian claims?

Christianity is the world's biggest religion, with nearly 2.4 billion adherents.[226] It is often lumped together with Judaism and Islam as a monotheistic religion. This, however, as we have seen, is a rather superficial classification. For, although Christianity derives from, or rather was a breakaway from, Judaism, it is a fundamentally different *type* of religion from Judaism. While Judaism is in its essence a *communal* religion, Christianity is a *creed* religion.

### Jesus as "the Christ"

The central tenet of the Christian creed is the belief that a particular man who lived two thousand years ago was not a mere mortal but was "the Christ", the Son of God who died for the sins of mankind and who forms part of a divine Trinity. There are a number of versions of the creed, but the central tenet is summed up in several verses of the New Testament. For example: "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*"[227] And: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.*"[228]

It is not surprising that these comforting and uplifting messages have attracted millions of converts to Christianity over the

centuries. They offer the individual a sense of security and the prospect of salvation and eternal life. Judaism is much less attractive, and as a communal religion it is geared to the nation or the community rather than to the individual. And, while even today Judaism (particularly orthodox Judaism) does its best to discourage prospective converts and makes conversion an ordeal, Christianity goes out of its way to attract converts, often by means of energetic missionary activity.

### The Christian Creed

Most Christian denominations have a creed, or confession of faith, which lies at the heart of that denomination and is generally recited at a pivotal point in the church service and also in catechisms and for the purposes of baptism. The so-called Apostles' Creed is one of the most widely used creeds, being used, among others, by the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists. Here is the wording of the English translation of the Apostles' Creed as it appears in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

1. I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
2. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
3. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.
4. Under Pontius Pilate, He was crucified, died, and was buried.
5. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.
6. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
7. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
8. I believe in the Holy Spirit,
9. the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
10. the forgiveness of sins,
11. the resurrection of the body,
12. and the life everlasting. Amen.[229]

No fewer than six of the twelve articles relate to Jesus. The specific beliefs are:

- That Jesus is the Christ, "our Lord" and the Son of God;
- That Jesus was fathered by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary;
- That Jesus was crucified;
- That Jesus rose from the dead;
- That there will be a "second coming" when Jesus "will come again to judge the living and the dead".

Only one of these beliefs is factually correct: that Jesus was executed by crucifixion. The rest are either demonstrably false or are speculative. Three of the articles begin "I believe in…" They are:

- I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth;
- I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord; and
- I believe in the Holy Spirit.

These three articles together establish a belief in the Trinity, a three-in-one form of godhead, which may raise doubts about whether Christianity really is a monotheistic religion at all. And, when it comes to Jesus, most Christian denominations require their adherents not only to believe *that* he was born of a virgin, *that* he rose from the dead and *that* there will be a second coming, but they also require belief *in* Jesus: "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord."

The contrast with Judaism could not be starker. Judaism rests on no one figure — not even Moses, who can lay claim to no more elevated a title than that of prophet, an appellation which he shares with a score of other Jewish leaders and teachers. What is more, neither Moses nor any of the other Jewish biblical figures — including the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — is ever portrayed in the Jewish scriptures as anything but fallible, frail and highly imperfect.

## Jesus's Teachings

Jesus was born and died a Jew. So how did this sea-change come about? The short answer is that it came about not as a result of anything done by Jesus himself but by dint of the major makeover and public relations exercise on the part of Paul, who effectively created Christianity and managed to establish a large following among non-Jews.

Some of Jesus's teachings were at variance with standard Jewish doctrines in his own day. For example, when criticised by Pharisees for allowing his disciples to pluck ears of corn on the sabbath, Jesus retorted, "*The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.*"[230]

Orthodox Judaism would have done well to adopt this eminently sensible position itself. Orthodox Judaism has a much more narrowly pedantic and indeed irrational attitude to such rules, and never more so than at the present time. (See Chapter 5 for more on this.)

Some of Jesus's other teachings were less practical. His injunctions to "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemy" were clearly intended to contrast with the "eye for an eye" and "love your neighbour" doctrines of mainstream Judaism and to show that Jesus's movement was more humanitarian. And the same goes for the well-known exhortation, "*And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.*"[231] If these teachings were indeed preached by Jesus — because none of them are mentioned by Paul — they certainly have not been practised by the Christian churches in the two millennia since Jesus's death.

Despite these disagreements, Jesus and his followers evidently continued to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem and to observe Jewish law generally. Jesus's only problem was the claim made on his behalf — probably not by himself personally — that he was the Jewish Messiah. This is what brought Jesus into conflict with both the Jewish authorities of the day and, more importantly, with their Roman overlords. And it was this that led to his execution at the hands of the Romans by the normal Roman method of execution,

crucifixion.

**“Messiah”**

The belief in a Messiah is not mentioned anywhere in the Five Books of Moses but is a major theme in the Prophets, and particularly in the Book of Isaiah. One key verse in Isaiah predicts that a descendant of King David will gather together the Jews from exile, destroy their enemies and reunite them in their ancestral land.[232] Although the word “messiah” is not used here, this is a portrayal of what was later referred to as the messiah. The messiah was to be as much a political as a religious leader. The word “messiah” (Hebrew: *mashiach*) means “the anointed one”, as anointing with oil was the way kings were consecrated in Biblical times. (The British coronation ceremony still combines anointing with crowning, but in ancient Israel there was no crowning, only anointing.) And the Greek equivalent of “messiah” was “christos”, or, in English, “Christ”.

**“What is Truth?”**

Why should a convert choose Christianity in preference to one of the many other cults that existed at the time? The key lies in the claim of Christianity to embody “the truth” coupled with the promise of “salvation” to its adherents. This is particularly stressed in John’s Gospel, where the word “truth” occurs twenty times. It is here that Jesus is quoted as claiming: *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.”*[233] And it is also in this Gospel that we find the famous (and probably fictitious) exchange between Jesus and Pontius Pilate. When Pilate asks Jesus whether he claims to be the King of the Jews (i.e. the Messiah), Jesus ducks the question and then adds: *“To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.”* Pilate’s mocking retort is: *“What is truth?”*[234]

As a Roman and therefore an adherent of the Roman civic or state religion — a communal religion — Pontius Pilate would have been bemused by the boast of a religion or cult which claimed to embody “the truth”. Communal religions did not make this kind of claim. The truth of what? As communal religions do not really have a creed, there is nothing in which “the truth” could repose. Even

Judaism, which was unusual in being a *monotheistic* communal religion, did not believe that the Jewish God was the only god, only that he was superior to the gods of all other nations because he was the Creator of the universe. The Ten Commandments do not say, "I am the only god." Instead the injunction is: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." This is a clear recognition that there *are* other gods — namely the gods of other peoples and nations — but the Jews are enjoined to worship their own national god in preference to any other gods. Even at the time of the coming of the Jewish Messiah, the prophet Micah writes*, "For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever*."[235] Judaism has never claimed to be the only "true" religion. (But see Chapter 5 for a discussion of a recent dispute over this among British Jews.)

Christianity, however, *did* and *does* make this claim for itself, and in so doing sowed the seeds of two opposite developments. The belief that Christianity alone had a lock on Truth, which gave believers the key to salvation and eternal life, was very attractive to prospective converts. It gave Christians a sense of superiority over non-believers but at the same time made them intolerant of non-believers; and, as Christian doctrine developed and became more and more refined, so each Christian denomination became intolerant not only of non-Christians but also of other "heretical" Christians who did not share the "true" faith. As a result, the history of Christianity has been punctuated by persecutions, schisms and even massacres and religious wars. Some of these — like the Northern Ireland "sectarian conflict" — were activated by ethnic, national or class enmities that predated or underlay the religious differences and were merely expressed in religious terms. But the fact of their being so expressed only tended to exacerbate the conflict by cloaking it in moral terms.

Could Christianity have combined its claim to have a lock on "the truth" with toleration for those who accepted "false" beliefs? Most branches of Christianity in the West are now much more tolerant than ever before. In some cases, such as the Church of England, both clergy and laity are split on moral and ethical values like the role of women in the Church, the whole question of homosexuality and even on the truth of the creed, so that the Church itself has accepted a degree of moral relativity and could

not therefore easily condemn moral relativity outside its ranks.

The Roman Catholic Church, by contrast, rejects moral relativism. In 2005 the future Pope Benedict XVI condemned the drift "*towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires*".[236] What he offered instead was: "*Having a clear Faith, based on the Creed of the Church*." However, even the Catholic Church has become more tolerant of other religions and other denominations, though the difficulty it finds in doing so is reflected in this definition of "religious toleration" in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

> By *religious toleration* is understood the magnanimous indulgence which one shows towards a religion other than his own, accompanied by the moral determination to leave it and its adherents unmolested in private and public, although internally one views it with complete disapproval as a 'false faith'.

This extract is a good illustration of the difficulty of reconciling toleration with the claim to have a monopoly of the truth. But, what if Christianity's claims *are* actually true? Would intolerance of dissent then be more acceptable? Not at all, but it may at least be more understandable.

So, our next task is to test some of the main claims of fact put forward by Christianity:

- Jesus's claimed birth in Bethlehem;
- Jesus's claimed descent from King David; and
- Jesus's claimed virgin birth.

As we shall see, none of these claims will stand up to scrutiny. But why were they made in the first place? The reason is simply that for Paul to win converts to the worship of an executed leader of a small Jewish sect it was necessary to portray the deceased object of worship in the most flattering light possible. Hence the claim that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, a claim which was obviously originally intended to attract Jewish adherents to the movement but which turned out to be much more successful in attracting Gentile converts, who would have been less critical of such a claim and much more likely to accept the stories of royal

descent, virgin birth and miraculous signs and wonders.

# *The Birth of a Myth*

## Was Jesus Born in Bethlehem?

Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Or was he? It is one of the best known "facts" of Christianity, on the strength of which the town of Bethlehem has developed a thriving tourist trade. The reason for the claim that Jesus was born in Bethlehem is simply to tie in with the famous prediction of the prophet Micah that Bethlehem would be the birthplace of the Messiah (though the word "Messiah" is not used here), whose reign would usher in a time of peace between nations, in the famous words, "*and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.*" But even then each nation will still worship its own gods: *"For all people will walk every one in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever."*[237] A parallel passage in Isaiah identifies the Messiah (again without using that word) as *"a shoot out of the stock of Jesse"*,[238] who we know from the Book of Samuel was from Bethlehem and was the father of King David.[239] Pulling the threads together, what we get is a requirement that the Messiah be born in Bethlehem and a descendant of the royal house of David. If Jesus was the Messiah he had to qualify under both these heads.

But *was* Jesus really born in Bethlehem? Even the writers of the Christian scriptures disagree among themselves. Matthew and Luke both say yes, while John[240] and Mark[241] give the impression of never even having heard of Jesus's supposed Bethlehem birth but assume that his birthplace was Nazareth, a small town in the northern region of Galilee, at the opposite end of the country from Bethlehem.

But even the accounts of Matthew and Luke do not really agree. Luke is well aware that Jesus was associated in the minds of his contemporaries with Nazareth, not Bethlehem, so he feels obliged to explain to his readers how it was that this Galilean happened to be born so far from home.

We today are much more accustomed to the idea of babies being born far from home than was the case then. Nowadays we even

hear of births taking place in taxi-cabs or on board aeroplanes in mid-air between continents. But the period we are concerned with was one when travel was slow, troublesome and dangerous and when most people spent their whole lives in one little village without venturing more than a few miles in any direction from birth to death.

This is why Luke clearly finds it so necessary to offer us an explanation of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem. And what *is* his explanation? It is the familiar story about the Roman census. An imperial decree was issued, says Luke, which required that everyone return "*every one to his own city*".[242] In the case of Joseph and Mary, this meant that they had to travel all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, which was Joseph's "own city".

On the face of it this sounds convincing enough. There is nothing like a little detail to win the confidence of an audience! Further investigation, however, reveals that the whole story is bogus.

What, after all, *is* a census? We today of course live in a much more numerate age than has ever existed before, and we are forever counting, measuring, calculating and checking every conceivable thing, sometimes (or so it would appear) for no reason other than to exercise our numerate skills! In most modern states a census is taken every few years, and all it is is a head count, to see how big the population is. But, despite the seeming meaninglessness of it, it has an eminently practical purpose. The object is not only to see whether the population as a whole has grown or declined but also, among many other things, whether there has been a shift of population from some regions to others. In other words, a census is a very practical exercise. What interests the census-taker is where people *are*, not where they once *were* or where their ancestors may happen to have come from.

The Roman government, being essentially made up of down-to-earth, practical administrators, was likewise not interested in figures for their own sake. The Roman census in fact had a specific practical purpose: taxation. The government wanted to know how many people there were in each locality so as to be able to calculate the tax due from each. And where would Joseph have paid his taxes? Not in Bethlehem, even if his family *had* originally come from there, but in Nazareth, where, as even Luke is quite happy to

admit, he was actually resident. Seen in the light of history, therefore, nothing could be *less* in keeping with the true nature and purpose of a Roman census than a move from a person's actual place of residence to some remote supposed birthplace or ancestral home town.

One little snag, though, is that the Roman census would not have affected Nazareth in any case, as Galilee was not under direct Roman rule but had its own ruler, the "tetrarch" Herod Antipas, son of King Herod.

But that is not the only problem connected with the census. Luke is obviously very anxious for us to accept his story about Jesus being born in Bethlehem, so he gives us a lot of detail in explaining it. He actually goes so far as to specify the name of the Roman governor under whom the census was held: Cyrenius. There certainly *was* a governor of that name (or Quirinius, to put it in its proper Latin form) and, what is more, he is known from Roman sources to have held a census. But his mention by Luke in connection with the birth of Jesus creates more problems than it solves. Above all, there is a problem of date. Quirinius certainly conducted a census — but at a time when Jesus would already have been ten years old! As it happens, Quirinius's census can be precisely dated by means of the very detailed account given by the historian Josephus.[243] According to him Quirinius was sent to conduct his census shortly after Judea had been annexed by Rome, which occurred in the year 6 or 7 CE. This census was obviously intended to be an initial "stock-taking" now that Judea was to be governed directly by Roman officials.

*Some* Christian commentators have cheerfully admitted that Luke's dating of the census is a decade out and have simply left it at that. But most Christian writers on the subject have recognised that *if* they make this apparently trivial admission of error on Luke's part, the whole story of Jesus's Bethlehem birth falls to the ground. This has led to some desperate attempts to justify Luke's account of the census.

Aided by an inscription describing an unnamed Roman military official, apologists have rushed to suggest that perhaps Quirinius had had an *earlier* — and totally unrecorded — tour of duty in the area and that the anonymous official was none other than himself

in this role, conveniently dated to the time of Jesus's birth.[244] Besides the total lack of evidence for jumping to so improbable a conclusion, there is another little snag: the generally accepted date of Jesus's birth was at a time when Rome had no jurisdiction either in Bethlehem or in Nazareth, so there *could* have been no census to coincide with Jesus's birth.

This is because Jesus was born during the lifetime of King Herod "the Great", who reigned from 37 to 4 BCE. How do we know that? We have it on the authority of Luke himself[245] together with that of Matthew.[246] The problem is that Herod died in 4 BCE, fully ten years before Quirinius's census, and during Herod's reign no Roman census could have been held in his territory, which included both Judea and Galilee, i.e. both Bethlehem and Nazareth.

It is clear from this that Luke has really tied himself in knots. On the one hand, he dates Jesus's birth to 4BCE *at the latest*. On the other hand, he associates Jesus's birth with an event that happened a decade later. Which story do we believe, and does it matter?

Yes, it *does* matter. It matters because acceptance of Jesus's birth-date as falling in the reign of King Herod will finally put paid to the story of the Bethlehem birth, which as we have already seen is to be rejected on other grounds in any case.

One of the best known details of the Bethlehem story is the incident about the inn and the manger. The charming and pathetic scene painted for us by Luke (and, incidentally, by him *alone* of the Christian scripture writers) has so captivated generations of children and adults alike that no one has stopped to ask some basic questions. Such as: What were Joseph and Mary doing looking for accommodation at the inn in the first place? Hotels, inns, hostelries and the like were very few and far between in the ancient world as a whole. Travellers normally stayed with friends or relations. Why did Joseph and Mary not do so? After all, was this not Joseph's original home town? That, according to Luke, was the whole reason for his journey to Bethlehem. Or are we to believe that there was not a single member of his family left there?

The more closely we examine the Bethlehem story, the more it disintegrates before our very eyes. To take another point: Why did Mary accompany Joseph to Bethlehem? Not only is it foolhardy for a woman in the last stages of pregnancy to undertake a long and

perilous journey, but no one has ever claimed that *Mary's* family came from Bethlehem, only Joseph's. If Joseph and Mary had been husband and wife at the time, that would explain her accompanying him, but they were *not* married.

So far we have confined our discussion to Luke's account of the birth of Jesus. But what about Matthew, who also places the birth in Bethlehem?[247] Unlike Luke, Matthew says not a word about any census, nor is there any mention of an inn or a manger. On the contrary, Matthew's account gives us the impression that Bethlehem was the permanent home of Joseph and Mary, and Jesus is said to have been born in a "house".[248] When Nazareth is first mentioned, Matthew finds it necessary to give a special explanation of Joseph and Mary's decision to settle in Galilee rather than in Judea,[249] thus perpetuating the initial impression of Bethlehem rather than Nazareth as Joseph and Mary's normal place of residence.

But, if this had *really* been the case, then why does Luke tie himself in knots in order to *explain* the couple's residence in Bethlehem? Presumably because Luke knew that Bethlehem was *not* where they came from but felt impelled to get them there by hook or by crook in order to establish Bethlehem as Jesus's birthplace. Matthew is equally concerned to set the birth in Bethlehem, but he adopts a different technique. Instead of inventing a story in order to transfer Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, he slyly gives us the impression that they had been living in Bethlehem all the time! But his concern about a Bethlehem birth for Jesus comes out nevertheless. It comes out particularly in his (slightly distorted) quotation of the well-known passage from the prophet Micah[250] predicting that it would be from Bethlehem that the Jewish Messiah would arise.[251]

Here we have the key to the whole problem of Jesus's birth. Both Matthew and Luke want to prove to their readers that Jesus was the Messiah predicted in the Jewish prophetic writings. One of the essential prerequisites of the Messiah was that he be born in Bethlehem. Therefore, in order to "qualify" Jesus just *had* to be equipped with a Bethlehem birth. If we had *only* Matthew's account of the birth and not Luke's, we might well have believed that Jesus had indeed been born in Bethlehem. But Luke gives the game away by concocting an elaborate and demonstrably false story in order to "prove" the Bethlehem birth, thus unwittingly tarring the whole

episode with the brush of fiction.

By contrast with both Matthew and Luke, John, the author of the fourth Gospel, is not much interested in establishing Jesus's credentials as the Jewish Messiah *in the traditional Jewish sense*. John's Gospel, it is commonly maintained, was written for a non-Jewish readership, which explains why the claim that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah as prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures is played down in his book.

In other words, John had no axe to grind as regards Jesus's birthplace, so it is all the more intriguing to see what he has to say about it. Interestingly enough, he relates an incident which bears directly on this issue. He tells us[252] that the Jews of Jesus's time were debating the question of whether or not to accept Jesus's claim to be the Messiah, the chief objection to acceptance being Jesus's Galilean origin.[253] Those rejecting Jesus's Messianic claim confront him directly with the prophetic prerequisite: "*Has not the scripture said that the Christ is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?*"[254] Does John make Jesus or one of his disciples object to this and explain that Jesus *was* indeed a descendant of David and that he *had* been born in Bethlehem as required? Not at all. On the contrary, John takes it for granted that Jesus did *not* meet these prerequisites of Jewish messianic prophecy. For John this did not matter very much; therefore there is all the more reason to believe him on this point.

**Jesus's Genealogy**

The extract I have just referred to in John's Gospel also introduces another very important question: Jesus's genealogy. Jewish prophetic writings made it clear that the Messiah not only had to be born in Bethlehem but also had to be a descendant of King David. That is the really important requirement and is the reason for the insistence on a Bethlehem birth. In fact, the *only* reason for requiring that the Messiah be born in Bethlehem was precisely that Bethlehem was the city of David.

But, even if, for argument's sake, we were to accept Luke's extremely improbable Bethlehem birth story, that story itself reveals that neither Joseph nor Mary had any relations living in Bethlehem. So what about the requirement that the Messiah be of Davidic descent?

As we have just seen, John does not even try to persuade his readers on this score. As usual, however, both Matthew and Luke are more concerned to fit Jesus into the Jewish messianic scriptural mould. Both writers accordingly give us a detailed family tree tracing Jesus back to King David. Matthew's family tree[255] actually starts with Abraham, the first of the Jewish patriarchs, while Luke[256] outdoes him by going all the way back to Adam! At first glance, this all looks very impressive. After all, how many modern families are able to trace their descent back for a thousand years? — which is the difference in time between David and Jesus.

Closer scrutiny raises a number of questions. First, there is a huge difference between the two genealogies even in the number of generations separating Jesus from King David. Matthew specifically tells us that there were 28 generations, fourteen from David to the Babylonian Exile and another fourteen from the Exile to the birth of Jesus.[257] Luke gives no figures, but a count of the number of names he mentions as Jesus's ancestors yields a total of no fewer than 41 generations for the same period as represented by Matthew's 28. For the thousand-odd-year period Luke's 41 generations average out at just over 24 years apiece. Matthew's fourteen generations from David to the Exile average out to about 28 ½ years each, but his last fourteen generations have a mean span of a whopping 41½ years.

So what? These discrepancies are so big that they cannot just be ignored. What they reveal is an attempt on the part of both writers to juggle the figures. The two genealogies are very different from each other, but one thing they have in common is the number seven. We have already noted Matthew's tally of 28 generations from David to Jesus. But what is perhaps even more significant is the fact that there were traditionally supposed to be fourteen generations from Abraham, the founding father of Judaism, to King David. This is specifically mentioned by Matthew as well,[258] but he took it straight from ancient Jewish tradition.[259] It seems that Matthew was determined to find the same numerical pattern in the descent of David from Abraham. But why *fourteen* generations each time? Because seven was considered a sacred, mystical or even a magical number in ancient times, and fourteen is simply twice seven. There were *seven* days in a week; the *seventh* day was a day of rest; Jacob worked for the hand of Rachel for *seven* years, and

then, when cheated by his father-in-law, for another *seven* years; there were *seven* years of plenty in Joseph's Egypt, followed by *seven* years of famine — to mention just a few of the many hundreds of examples of the significance of seven and its multiples in ancient Jewish tradition.

Luke's family tree uses the number seven as well, but in a different way from Matthew. There is a total of 77 (i.e. 11 x 7) generations in his line of descent from Adam to Jesus.[260] In other words, both Matthew and Luke are determined to bring Jesus's genealogy into line with traditional Jewish genealogies, using the mystical number seven in order to invest Jesus's birth with an aura of divine destiny. But this fiddling with the figures together with the numerical discrepancies between the two genealogies can hardly inspire us with much confidence in either.

This numerical question is, however, a minor problem by comparison with the ones we run up against when we start looking at the actual names in the two supposed lineages. Between David and Jesus, a period of a thousand years, only two names (three, if you include Jesus's father, Joseph) occur on both lists! These are the names of Zerubbabel and his father Shealtiel.[261] Now Zerubbabel was a leading figure in Jewish history at the time of the return from the Babylonian Exile, about five hundred years before the birth of Jesus. Zerubbabel was recognised at the time as the leader of the Jewish people and it seems quite likely that he was indeed a descendant of King David. From the point of view of Matthew and Luke, however, a more important question was whether Jesus could possibly trace his lineage from Zerubbabel. Both Matthew and Luke attempt to do so, but with totally conflicting results. Not a single name is common to their two genealogies between Zerubbabel and Joseph. Even the name of Joseph's own father, Jesus's grandfather, is different in the two lists. Matthew calls him Jacob, while Luke tells us it was Heli, two quite irreconcilable names. (Joseph's grandfather, called Matthat by Luke and Matthan by Matthew, is the one person between Zerubbabel and Joseph to have even the *possibility* of being common to both genealogies.)

Only one conclusion can be drawn from this huge gap between the two supposed genealogies: both Matthew and Luke are determined to trace Jesus's descent from King David. Indeed, they

*have* to do so in order to maintain that he was the Messiah as predicted by the Jewish prophets. But, it is quite clear that they had no *evidence* of his actual descent, so each simply *invented* a lineage to link him with Zerubbabel and thus with King David.

Needless to say, this problem of the irreconcilability of the two lineages has not gone unnoticed. So desperate did some Christian commentators become that they resorted to the claim that the two genealogies were not even meant to be the same. Matthew's family tree, they maintained, is that of Joseph, while Luke's is that of Mary. In this way it was presumably hoped not only to solve the problem of the irreconcilable differences between the two genealogies but also to invest Mary as well as Joseph with Davidic ancestry. Unfortunately for them, however, the texts themselves are only too clear. Neither genealogy includes Mary, but both make it quite plain that this was Joseph's lineage.[262] Matthew does mention Mary, but only as married to Joseph, whose family tree is the one he presents.

It certainly *would* have been more convenient for Christianity if either Matthew or Luke *had* attributed the descent from David to Mary rather than to Joseph. For according to the theory of the "virgin birth" Joseph was not Jesus's father in any case!

In other words, Jesus's descent from King David *through Joseph*, which both Matthew and Luke are so anxious for us to accept, negates another of their most cherished beliefs, namely the idea that Jesus was the "Son of God" and his mother Mary a virgin. Belief in a virgin birth is even more difficult to accept than Jesus's descent from King David, and it certainly does not make things any easier for Christianity when it is realised that these two unlikely beliefs are by their very nature mutually exclusive.

**The Virgin Birth**

What is the evidence for so remarkable and miraculous an event? As usual, the Christian Gospels themselves do not agree. Once again, Matthew and Luke alone claim a virgin birth for Jesus, while Mark and John make no mention of it. In general, the absence of some supposed fact from a source is not very good evidence against the truth of that fact. After all, every writer must select his facts from a large pool and he will do so in accordance with what he considers significant, the point being that no two writers can be

guaranteed to have exactly the same set of priorities. But a virgin birth is so remarkable and so miraculous an event that it is hard to understand how any author could possibly omit to mention it — and least of all an author as concerned as both Mark and John were to show that Jesus was a remarkable man of miracles! We can only conclude that these two writers either did not know the story of Jesus's virgin birth or else did not believe it. In either case, it is a telling blow against our acceptance of it.

Both Matthew and Luke link the story of the virgin birth directly to their claim that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. Luke has the angel Gabriel appear to Mary and announce the impending birth of a son to her.[263] In Luke's graphic depiction of the scene, Mary is somewhat agitated at the news, making the specific statement that she has never had sexual intercourse.[264] Besides this emphasis placed on Mary's virginity, Luke makes several other points here:

1. Mary, though unmarried and a virgin, is betrothed to Joseph.[265]
2. The conception is to be seen as a sign of divine favour to Mary.[266]
3. The unborn child is to be "the son of God".[267]
4. King David is described as the child's "father".[268]
5. The unborn child is to "reign over the house of Jacob for ever".[269]
6. The child is to be named Jesus.[270]

The description of David as the child's "father" is obviously meant simply as "ancestor", and this statement serves as a shorthand for claiming that the unborn infant is to be the Messiah. But, how can the unborn child be at one and the same time the "son of God" and the son of Joseph? The answer is that he cannot, for, as we have already seen, his claim to Davidic descent depends on Joseph's paternity, the very attribute which is here being denied!

The statement about reigning over "the house of Jacob" shows just how traditionally Jewish an image of the Messiah is presented here. "The house of Jacob" is just another way of saying "the children of Israel", Jacob or Israel being one of the three Jewish Patriarchs. In other words, the Messiah is seen not only as a saviour

but also as a ruler over an earthly kingdom — a concept typical of communal religions.

Matthew's briefer account of the annunciation[271] is similar to that of Luke except that he has the angel appear to Joseph instead of to Mary. In addition, as usual, Matthew uses a Jewish scriptural quotation to "prove" the truth of his claims, on this occasion one of the very best known of all Messianic prophecies, derived from the prophet Isaiah:

> Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.[272]

I say "derived" from the prophet Isaiah advisedly, because there is one very significant difference between Matthew's version of the prophecy and the original.[273] Isaiah's prophecy is not about a virgin at all but simply about a young girl or young woman. The Hebrew language, in which of course the prophecy is written, has two quite distinct words. There is the word *betulah*, a word frequently found in the Jewish scriptures with the specific meaning of "virgin". In Chapter 22 of Deuteronomy, for example, *betulim*, "virginity", occurs no fewer than six times in a sexual context. Isaiah himself uses the word *betulah* on five occasions, even where there would merely be an *assumption* that the girl in question was a virgin. But in the prophecy with which we are concerned Isaiah uses a different word altogether, *almah*, a much more general word referring simply to a young girl of marriageable age.

Is there some reason for the prophet's choice of vocabulary here? The word *betulah* is used only of girls without any sexual experience. But in the passage in question Isaiah is dealing with a married woman who either is already pregnant or else is shortly to become so; someone, in other words, who could most certainly *not* be a virgin. It is clear from the context that Isaiah is not talking here of some Messianic figure of the far-distant future but of a *specific* unborn child, namely the son of King Ahaz, the later Hezekiah, one of the "good" kings of Judah — who lived some seven hundred years before the time of Jesus! It would have been quite wrong for Isaiah to refer to Ahaz's queen as a "virgin", which is why he does not use the word *betulah* here but the more general word *almah*.

In fact, not only does the prophet use a different word but he

also prefixes it with the definite article, "the". Correctly translated, what Isaiah is saying is "*the* young woman shall conceive and bear a son…", which confirms our initial impression that Isaiah is talking about a *particular* young woman whose identity is known to him.

There might never have been any doctrine of virgin birth in Christianity had it not been for the way in which the Isaiah passage is translated in the Septuagint, the authorised translation of the Jewish scriptures into Greek which was the form of the Bible most familiar to the Jews of Jesus's day. Greek was the *lingua franca* of the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean seaboard and it was used by Jews as well as by their non-Jewish neighbours.

Greek *does* have a word, *neanis*, corresponding to the more generalised meaning of the Hebrew *almah*, but it is comparatively rare. This may be the reason why the Septuagint translators used the much commoner word *parthenos* or "virgin", properly the equivalent of the Hebrew *betulah*, to represent the word *almah* in Isaiah's prophecy.

Luke was probably not even of Jewish origin, so it is unlikely that he would have been able to read the Bible in Hebrew even if he had wanted to. Though he does not quote Isaiah, he *does* relate the virgin birth directly to his claim that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. So, if he did get his idea of the virgin birth from Isaiah, then it could only have been from the Greek version, in which Isaiah is made to prophesy the birth of a son to a *virgin*, something which he had no intention of doing!

But what about Matthew? He certainly *was* a Jew and, what is more, his Biblical citations are at least sometimes drawn from the Hebrew text. He is also said (by a certain Bishop Papias, who wrote in about the year 130) to have "composed the *logia* in the Hebrew language".[274] There has been a good deal of discussion of this statement, as the meaning of the term *logia* is not quite clear. It is a Greek word literally translated as "oracles", and so probably refers to the Biblical "proof" texts which Matthew is so fond of quoting — he uses no fewer than sixty of them altogether. But, of course, even if Matthew really did go to the Hebrew Bible to find these passages, he may nevertheless have been influenced by the Septuagint in translating Isaiah's "young woman" as "virgin".

But there may also have been other reasons for this. For one

thing, it is quite clear that there had always been a big question mark hanging over Mary's sexual morality. Unlike the story of the virgin birth, however, these doubts about Mary are reflected in all four of the Christian Gospels, and, in addition, in non-Christian sources. It was clearly a subject which caused the early Christians acute embarrassment.

Both Matthew and Luke specifically describe Mary as *betrothed* to Joseph at the time of Jesus's conception but not yet married to him.[275]

In fact, from Luke's account it does not appear that they *ever* got married. They are still only betrothed at the time of the supposed journey to Bethlehem[276] and Luke never broaches the topic again. In other words, as far as Luke's narrative is concerned, Mary appears to be an "unmarried mother". Even today there is still a stigma attached to being an "unmarried mother" among the adherents of certain religions. How much greater that stigma was in ancient times, and especially among the Jews, can be seen from the penalties for adultery detailed in the book of Deuteronomy. The extreme penalty, stoning to death, is reserved for the betrothed girl who voluntarily commits adultery before her marriage[277] or the bride who turns out not to be a virgin on her wedding night.[278]

In Matthew's version of the story, Joseph and Mary *do* get married, but not until *after* Mary's pregnancy is discovered and *after* Joseph is prevailed upon by an angel to have second thoughts on the subject.[279] His first thoughts once he knew that Mary was pregnant were to send her away secretly, though he would have been entitled, as Matthew specifically tells us, to "*put her to shame*",[280] i.e. by announcing her adultery publicly and having her punished for it.

In both Matthew and Luke, therefore, all that stands between Mary and adultery is the claim that her pregnancy was caused by divine rather than human agency. This same claim is also the only shield Jesus has against a charge of illegitimacy.

Resorting to such a far-fetched explanation of the birth as a way out of the impasse may be a measure of the desperation felt by these two Christian writers. Significantly enough, nowhere else in the Christian scriptures is there any mention of a virgin birth for Jesus. This includes all Paul's epistles, as well as the Gospels of

Mark and John. While omitting any mention of any claim for Jesus to divine paternity, these two authors both *do* reveal something of the doubt surrounding his legitimacy.

In the middle of the heated argument as reported by John, "the Jews" are made to taunt Jesus by remarking, "*We were not born of fornication"*.[281] (I emphasise the word "we" because this is the force of the Greek, which here uses the pronoun "we", which is normally omitted as the subject is already expressed in the verb ending.) This taunt would be meaningless on its own, if we did not know of the long-standing Jewish belief that Jesus was illegitimate. The force of the taunt is therefore clearly meant to be: "*We* were not born of fornication — but you *were*!"

In Mark we find Jesus described by his fellow townsmen of Nazareth in the following terms: "*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?*"[282] The one name missing from this recitation of Jesus's relations is the most important one of all, that of Joseph. This cannot be because Joseph was not Jesus's "real" father, as those describing Jesus here, Nazarene Jews, would certainly not have believed any story of Jesus's miraculous birth (even if such stories were already being put about by his followers, which does not seem to be the case).

Moreover, when this same scene is repeated in the other Gospels, Joseph's name *does* occur:

> Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?[283]
>
> Is not this Joseph's son?[284] Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?[285]

Why is Mark's account different from the rest? It may make more sense to turn the question about and ask: Why do all these later accounts differ from Mark's? For Mark's statement is probably not only earlier than any of the others but also their source.

Before trying to explain this discrepancy it would be best to understand its implications. Traditional Jewish nomenclature — still used in the synagogue service and on Jewish tombstones —

referred to a person by his patronymic, thus “Joshua the son of Nun” or “Caleb the son of Jephuneh”, the second name being that of the father, never the mother — unless the name of the father was unknown! In other words, only someone of illegitimate birth would be referred to as “Jesus the son of Mary”. The fact that his own contemporaries and fellow-townsmen of Nazareth, who knew his family well, should refer to Jesus in this way is a clear indication that they regarded him as belonging to that category.

It would appear that the other Gospel writers changed the appellation of Jesus here precisely to avoid giving that impression. Some of the less authoritative manuscripts of Mark’s Gospel also make a similar change, but the most reliable manuscripts have the version quoted above, which is also to be found in all the authorised translations of the Christian scriptures of the western churches, Catholic and Protestant alike.

What is more, not only was there a long-standing Jewish and pagan tradition that Jesus was conceived in adultery but his natural father was even identified by name — as a Roman soldier called Panthera. According to Celsus, a pagan who wrote in about 180, not only was Mary guilty of adultery with Panthera but she was also convicted on this charge and driven out by Joseph, giving birth to Jesus secretly.[286]

The Christian Gospels are all clearly acutely aware of the slur on Jesus’s birth, and two of them do not even attempt to counter it. The other two, Matthew and Luke, who, as we have already seen in other connections, are not above fabricating stories for their own purposes, make a claim of divine birth for Jesus in order to deny the charge of illegitimacy. Seen in this light, the angel’s reassurance to Mary that she was “*full of grace*”[287] and the story of Joseph’s vision resulting in his forgiving Mary[288] can easily be explained as a way of whitewashing Mary from what was considered to be a mortal sin.

Here we have the best motive in the world for *inventing* a story of a virgin birth — and therefore for following the Septuagint’s mistranslation of the Isaiah prophecy. Such a story as that of Jesus’s virgin birth is not at all in keeping with Jewish tradition. There are plenty of miraculous births related in the Jewish scriptures, but these miracles all stop well short of divine participation in the

process in a fathering role. The usual type of Bible story involving a miraculous birth relates the birth of a son to a woman long past the age of child-bearing (like Abraham's wife Sarah) or to one (like the mothers of Samson and the prophet Samuel) who has long given up all hope of ever bearing a child. The miracle consists in curing the woman of her infertility, but the birth still takes place in the normal fashion. Indeed, the suggestion that God had directly fathered a human child could only be regarded in Jewish religious belief as blasphemous.

The fact that Matthew and Luke were prepared to run the risk of being accused of blasphemy may well be an indication of the seriousness with which they viewed the alternative — the labelling of Jesus as a bastard.

Some Christian apologists have taken the line that the very improbability of a virgin birth should persuade us that the story is true. But, why then is it mentioned only by Matthew and Luke but not by Mark or John? Above all, why is it never mentioned by Paul, the Christian writer closest in time to Jesus? What is more, though a claim of divine birth would not favourably impress Jews, Paul's writings — and the Gospels of Mark and John, for that matter — were directed more to pagans and non-Jews, to whom the idea of divine birth was not at all strange and was indeed associated with the names of great rulers and heroes.

The unfortunate circumstances surrounding his birth may also explain Jesus's hostility towards his mother. In the story of the wedding feast at Cana, for example, Jesus gives Mary short shrift when she has the temerity to point out that there is no more wine left.[289] Luke relates an incident in which a woman in the crowd calls out a blessing upon Jesus's mother: "*Blessed is the woman that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!*"[290] Jesus's response to this is curious: "*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!*"[291] There is more than a hint here that Jesus did not consider his mother to belong to the category of "those who hear the word of God and keep it". Perhaps most striking of all is the incident related by all three of the synoptic Gospels, in which, when Mary and Jesus's brothers come all the way from Nazareth to Capernaum to visit him, he shows little enthusiasm to see them.[292]

# *Conclusions*

Matthew and Luke make the same three major claims about Jesus's birth: that it was a virgin birth, that it took place in Bethlehem and that Jesus was of Davidic descent. But the evidence to back up these claims is quite different in the two accounts. In Luke the annunciation of the birth is made to Mary; in Matthew it is made to Joseph. Matthew has Joseph and Mary marry; Luke does not. Both offer genealogies to prove Jesus's Davidic lineage, but there are more differences than similarities, especially in the names of the ancestors nearest in time to Jesus, notably Joseph's own father. Luke uses an elaborate story about a Roman census to explain the presence of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem; Matthew gives the impression that they lived there permanently.

In addition, Matthew regales us with stories of a star, three wise men and a "massacre of the innocents", while all Luke can offer in their place are a few simple shepherds inspired by angelic visions. Where Matthew has Mary, Joseph and Jesus fleeing from Bethlehem to Egypt in order to escape Herod's death edict,[293] Luke has them staying in Bethlehem for forty days and then returning to Nazareth via Jerusalem.[294] When Matthew brings them to Nazareth, it is — in keeping with his version of the birth story though at variance with all the other Gospels — as though they now go there for the first time.[295]

As usual, Matthew offers us a Biblical text by way of corroboration:

> "*And he [viz. Joseph] went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by prophets might be fulfilled, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'*."[296]

This verse has attracted a good deal of attention, partly at any rate because for once Matthew is unable to find a Biblical text which he can "apply". The supposed Biblical verse which he "quotes" here simply does not exist! Explaining "Nazarene" as a reference not to the town of Nazareth but rather to the special nazirite oath taken by such Biblical figures as Samson does nothing

to save Matthew from his own petard. Jesus clearly was *not* a nazirite, as he had not forsworn wine. But reading the verse in that way would be of no assistance to Matthew, as no Biblical verse can be called into service in that case either. From the context, though, it seems quite plain that what Matthew is trying to do is desperately to find some Biblical justification for settling Joseph and his family in so unlikely a spot as Nazareth, a place with which — according to Matthew's birth story — they had had no prior association. The only way he can do so is to fabricate a Biblical quotation.

In other words, Matthew and Luke share the conclusions that they want their readers to accept about Jesus's birth and infancy but neither the factual evidence nor the reasoning from which those conclusions should have been derived. This shows that, instead of starting with the evidence and being led by it to the conclusions, they started with the conclusions and manufactured evidence to justify them. The three conclusions — that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, of Davidic descent and by virgin birth — are improbable enough in themselves, but, as we have seen, the contortions into which Matthew and Luke are forced in order to "prove" them only give the game away. And the fundamental factual disagreements between Matthew and Luke themselves as well as between them and the other Gospels and outside sources only confirm our view that the claims made for Jesus's birth — which all add up to claiming for him the title of the Messiah in accordance with Jewish scriptural prophecy — are as false as the evidence used to support those claims.

To cap it all, two of the three claims are mutually exclusive. As we have seen, the claim to Davidic lineage depends upon accepting Joseph as Jesus's father — the very thing which is denied by the virgin birth story!

## *Notes To Chapter Six*

Note: All Biblical references were consulted in the original Hebrew or Greek and the most suitable of the following translations was selected for each quotation. In this chapter, except where otherwise indicated, all quotations are from the RSV:

KJV — King James Version, 1611

RSV — Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1971

ASV — American Standard Version (Public Domain)

## *Review Of Chapter Six*

- Christianity is a creed religion, meaning that it is centred on a creed or set of beliefs.
- The central tenet of most brands of Christianity is belief in Jesus as the Son of God and as the Messiah, or the Christ, who died for the sins of mankind.
- A central text for most Christian denominations is this verse: "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16).
- This verse combines two key Christian beliefs: the belief that Christianity vouchsafes to believers "salvation", or "deliverance from sin" or "redemption from sin", and "everlasting life".
- Another fundamental Christian belief is that it is the only true religion: "*Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*" (John 14:6).
- Every Christian denomination or grouping believes that *it* is the only true religion.
- Jesus is also usually worshipped as divine, as a member of the so-called Holy Trinity.

- Other claims made for Jesus include:
  - Bethlehem birth
  - Descent from King David
  - Virgin birth
- Chapter 6 shows that none of these three claims is true.
- Jesus was born and died a Jew. Christianity was invented by Paul, probably the greatest PR man in history. By jetissoning the requirements of circumcision and kosher food, Paul was able to attract a large non-Jewish following and in so doing turn a small Jewish sect into a whole new religion, which unlike Judaism was a creed religion.
- From the beginning Christianity was intolerant of other religions, and before long intolerance and schisms within Christianity were in evidence, some of which, notably that between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, survive to this day.
- The modern school of "Intelligent Design", which is in reality a branch of creationism (ID), believes that every example of "irreducible complexity" or "specified complexity" is a separate miracle, which requires a leap of faith to accept.
- But Francis Collins, who completely rejects "Intelligent Design", fares no better. His attempt to graft Christian belief on to evolution is doomed to failure, because if God set evolution in motion, why should this be the three-in-one God of Christianity who is weighed down by all the baggage shown to be untrue in Chapter 6? An impersonal deist God, on the other hand, could coexist comfortably with belief in evolution.
- Is Christopher Hitchens's "Religion kills" remark relevant to Christianity? Christianity is certainly responsible for a good deal of bloodshed over the centuries, but a stark warning must be sounded: the fact that a conflict may be fought under religious labels doesn't necessarily make it a religious conflict. The Northern Ireland "sectarian conflict" is a case in point: a political conflict which was eventually settled by political means.
- How can the recent increased tolerance of the main western

Christian denominations be explained? The answer appears to lie in political and economic circumstances coupled with reduced church attendance.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *Crescent Moon and Rising Sun*

A bird's-eye view of two contrasting religions, Islam and Shinto, to test some of the hypotheses of this book.

### Classification

- *Islam*: Islam is a monotheistic creed religion whose profession of faith, known as the *Shahada* ("testimony") is the well-known declaration: *"There is no god but God, Mohammed is the messenger of God."* The word translated as "God" is of course *Allah*. This declaration preceded by the *Takbir*, *"Allahu Akbar"*, meaning "God is Great", makes up the *adhan,* or call to the faithful to prayer made by the *muezzin* from the minaret of every mosque five times a day.
- *Shinto*: Shinto is the polytheistic communal religion of Japan, with only token membership outside Japan. Shinto has no actual creed, but the central objects of worship are the *kami* ("gods" or "spirits"), which reside in all things, including the sun, the moon, the sea, mountains, trees, rivers and other natural phenomena, as well as in animals and the spirits of revered deceased ancestors and other distinguished human beings like the Emperor.

### Name

- *Islam*: The name *Islam*, meaning "submission [to God]", derives from the semitic triliteral root SLM, from which come the Arabic word *salaam* ("peace" — used as a greeting) and the Hebrew word *shalom* ("peace" — and also used as a greeting). The word *Muslim*, referring to an adherent of Islam, comes from the same root.
- *Shinto*: Like most communal religions, the Shinto religion does

not have a specific name. The word *Shinto* just means "the way of the gods". Although about 90% of Japanese people attend Shinto shrines and pray to the *kami*, only a small percentage identify as "Shinto" or "Shintoist" in surveys because these terms have no meaning for most Japanese.[297]

## Numbers

- *Islam*: Islam accounts for 23% of the world's population, with approximately 1.57 billion adherents, second only to Christianity, with 2.2 billion adherents.[298] This figure of 1.57 billion is up from 200 million in 1900 and 551 million in 1970.
- *Shinto*: As mentioned in the previous bullet point, there is some confusion about the number of Shinto adherents. Although about 70% of the Japanese profess no religious affiliation, as we have seen about 90% attend Shinto shrines — and there are no fewer than 10,000 Shinto shrines and 20,000 Shinto priests in Japan.[299]

## God(s)

- *Islam*: Islam is strictly monotheistic. The injunction in the Ten Commandments against the making of "graven images" is usually taken literally, resulting in the absence of any representations of human beings or animals from mosques and even from the coins of many Islamic states. Mohammed is greatly venerated, but no claim is advanced for him other than that of a prophet.
- *Shinto*: Shinto is polytheistic, with an infinite number of gods, referred to in Japanese as *yaoyorozu no kami*, literally "eight million kami".

## Beliefs

- *Islam*: Islam has Six Articles of Faith: (a) *Tawhid*: Belief in Allah as the one and only God; (b) *Malaika*: Belief in Angels; (c) *Kutub*: Belief in the Koran (*Quran*) and other scriptures; (d) Belief in Prophets (*nabi*) and Messengers (*rusul*) sent by Allah;

(e) Belief in a Day of Judgment (*qiyama*) and Resurrection; (f) *Qadar*: Belief in predestination. These are the Sunni beliefs; the Shia beliefs are slightly different.

- *Shinto:* In Shinto it is believed that the *kami* have the power to reward and punish. Shinto believers strive to obtain *magokoro*, a "pure sincere heart", which can only be granted by the *kami.* In general, the goal of Shinto is seen as communion with the inherent balance present in nature.

## Practices

- *Islam*: The Five Pillars of Islam are: (a) *Shahada* (see above); (b) *Salat*, prayer five times a day; (c) *Zakat* ("purification"), contributing to the poor; (d) *Sawm*, fasting during Ramadan; (e) *Hajj,* pilgrimage to Mecca.
- *Shinto*: Attending Shinto shrines, praying to the *kami* and engaging in the many *harae*, or purification rites (see under "Ethics", below).

## Leading Figure(s)

- *Islam*: According to Islam, Mohammed is the last and greatest of the prophets, but other prophets are also honoured, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.
- *Shinto*: The "Meiji Restoration" of 1868 restored the power of the Emperor after nearly 700 years of feudalism under the shogunate (1192–1867) and made Shinto a centralised national religion under the Emperor. The "Shinto Directive" or "Bunce Directive" issued by the United States in 1945 after Japan's defeat in World War II attempted to introduce a separation of religion and state on the US model. As a result Shinto has become decentralised again, but it still retains its close association with Japanese national identity, and Shinzo Abe, the current Prime Minister of Japan, has come out in favour of the reintroduction of state-Shintoism and of emperor worship.[300]

## Denominations

- *Islam*: Islam has two main denominations, Sunni and Shia, together with several smaller groupings. According to the Pew Research Center, the Sunni make up 87–90% and the Shia 10–13% of the world's Muslim population. The main concentration of Shia is in Iran, where 89% of the population belong to the "Twelver" branch of that denomination, followed by Iraq, where 60% to 70% of the population are Shia Muslims. The hostility between Sunni and Shia Islam is based not so much on differences in belief as on disagreement over the succession to Mohammed. In fact, however, underlying these purported differences is an ethnic divide between Iranians and non-Iranians, Iranians being essentially Indo-European or Indo-Aryan with a language related to Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, and ultimately to modern German, French and English. Iran was deliberately switched from Sunni to Shia by Shah Ismail I (reigned 1501–1524), who was intent on giving Iran a religious and national identity distinct from the Sunni Ottoman Turks and from the Sunni Arabs. The high proportion of Shia in Iraq, an Arab country, is thought to have resulted to a large extent from migration from Iran.
- *Shinto*: The main divisions in Shinto are Jinja ("Shrine")Shinto, Kyoha ("Sect") Shinto and Minzoku ("Folk") Shinto. "Shrine Shinto" refers to the beliefs and rituals of the shrines affiliated to the Jinja Honcho, or Association of Shinto Shrines. "Sect Shinto" refers to the thirteen Shinto denominations or sects recognised by the Japanese Government. "Folk Shinto" refers to practices of local Shinto shrines. The various denominations do not differ so much in their beliefs but rather on emphasis.

## Violence

- *Islam*: Does Islam preach violence? This is a hotly debated topic. There are a number of passages in the Koran that appear to condone or even incite violence against the "infidel" or non-believers. E.g. *"I will throw fear into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Then smite the necks smite of them each finger."*[301] On the other hand, there are those, like Muhammad Asad, who argue that the Quran verses in the Quran apparently allowing

the killing of non-believers is only in the context of defensive wars.[302]

- *Shinto*: The "Shinto Directive" of 1945 was based on a perception by the Americans that state Shintoism was somehow to blame for the Japanese "militaristic and ultranationalistic ideology", and in particular for the following doctrines: (i) The Emperor's superiority to other rulers because of his descent from the sun-goddess; (ii) The superiority of the Japanese people to other peoples; and (iii) The superiority of the land of Japan over other lands because it was so willed by the sun-goddess.

## Origins

- *Islam*: Was Islam spread by the sword? This common view has been strenuously opposed by writers who quote, among other things: *"There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong."*[303] However, two professors at Brigham Young University offer an authoritative explanation for their view that: *"Islam didn't spread by the sword; the Arabs did."*[304]
- *Shinto*: Most scholars believe that Shinto is the indigenous religion of Japan and has existed as such since prehistoric times. Toshio Kuroda, a Marxist historian, disagreed with this view and claimed that Shinto was an offshoot of Buddhism and only emerged as a separate religion after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. There is no real evidence for Kuroda's view.[305]

## Conversion

- *Islam*: "*Becoming a Muslim is a simple and easy process. All that a person has to do is to say a sentence called the Testimony of Faith (Shahada)… Once a person says the Testimony of Faith (Shahada) with conviction and understanding its meaning, then he/she has become a Muslim.*"[306] The website goes on to say that "*The conversion can be done alone*" without anyone else being present.

- *Shinto*: In common with most other communal religions, Shinto is not a proselytising religion and there is in fact no mechanism for conversion to Shinto.

## Toleration

- *Islam*: In Islamic states, notably Moorish Spain (*Al-Andalus*), the "Peoples of the Book", i.e. chiefly Jews and Christians, were traditionally treated more favourably than other non-Muslims and were accorded *dhimmi* status, which gave them certain rights in return for payment of a special tax (*jizyah*). Although this status was lower than that enjoyed by Muslims, its chief value was that it accorded dhimmis limited religious toleration. So, in Moorish Spain, for example, the pecking order was Arabs, Berbers, Muwallads (Christian converts to Islam) and only then dhimmis, who were not allowed public displays of their faith like processions, and were not permitted to build new places of worship or even to repair existing ones. There has also long been a major rift between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and never more bitter than at the present time.
- *Shinto*: There are essentially three possible solutions, all of which have been used by Shinto at different times. (i) The first solution is to ban the intruding foreign religion altogether. This is the way Christianity was treated in Japan from 1597 until 1853, or really until 1871, when complete freedom of religion was established under the Meiji Restoration of imperial power. (ii) The second solution is for the communal religion to coexist harmoniously but quite separately from the foreign religion concerned. This is essentially the relationship that has existed between Shinto and Christianity since 1871. Such is the toleration enjoyed by Christianity in Japan that, although Christians number less than 1% of the population, there have been no fewer than eight Christian Prime Ministers in Japan, the first of whom, Hara Takashi, held office from 1918 to 1921, long before there was a Catholic president of the United States! (iii) The third solution is to tolerate the alien religion to the extent of amalgamating with it to some extent. For some 1,200 years until the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Shinto assimilated Buddhism in the so-called Shinbutsu-

shugo ("syncretism of kami and Buddhism"). The "Separation Order" of 1868 attempted to free Shinto from Buddhist influence, but temple-shrines are still common and a partial syncretism is still in evidence, with funerals, for example, generally being conducted in accordance with Buddhist rites while weddings are mostly left to Shinto.

## Community

- *Islam*: Although Islam is a creed religion it has also always combined with the creed a sense of community, or *ummah*, meaning "people", "nation" or "community". *Ummah* is short for *ummat al-Islamiyah*, meaning "the Islamic nation", referring to the collective community of Muslims around the world. This links up with the concept of a caliphate, meaning an Islamic state under a ruler combining political and religious power known as a caliph, or *khalifa*, literally "successor", "lieutenant" or "deputy" to Mohammed. It is no accident that the Islamic Republic of Iran is essentially a theocracy — and that in 2014 the self-styled "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant", known as ISIS, ISIL or Da'ish (*ad- Dawlah al-Islamiyah fil-Iraq wa ash-Sham*), claimed to have set up a new "caliphate" combining political and religious hegemony.
- *Shinto*: Despite the "Shinto Directive" of 1945, Shinto remains at the heart of Japanese culture and national identity, and it is very largely confined to Japan.

## Sacred Book(s)

- *Islam*: The centrality of the Koran (Quran) to Islam cannot be exaggerated. Islam believes that the Koran was revealed to Mohammed by God through the archangel Gabriel. The Koran is supplemented by the *hadith* ("reports"), or account of Mohammed's life, chiefly to aid interpretation of the Koran itself.
- *Shinto*: Shinto has no canon of scripture, but there are some books of mythology and history, none of which are earlier than the eighth century CE, including: *Kojiki* ("Record of Ancient Matters"), *Shoku Nihongi* and *Nihon Shoki*

("Continuing Chronicles of Japan"), *Rikkokushi* ("Six National Histories") and *Jinno Shotoki* (study of Shinto and Japanese politics and history).

## Claim of "Truth"

- *Islam*: Islam claims to be the only true religion. The Religion of Islam website set up under the auspices of Saudi Arabia has no fewer than 134 articles claiming to contain evidence of the truth of Islam.[307]
- *Shinto*: Shinto makes no claim to truth. The very concept of a "true" religion would be alien to it — as to most other communal religions. So the test of credibility has no relevance to Shinto.

## Ethics

- *Islam*: The Koran contains a number of commandments relating to ethical conduct, including: Honouring one's parents (17:23); Prohibition of "mercy killings" of one's own children (17:31); Prohibition of adultery (17:32); Prohibition of killing "unjustly" (17:33); Care for orphans (17:34); Keeping one's promises (17:34); Honesty (17:35); Injunction against arrogance (17:37).
- *Shinto*: Shinto seek harmony and purity in all areas of life, both physically and morally, and the avoidance of *tsumi*, meaning sin, crime or unethical conduct. Hence the many *harae*, or purification rituals, including *temizu* (washing hands and face) and *shubatsu* (cleansing by the sprinkling of salt), and having new buildings and even cars being blessed by a Shinto priest.

# *Reflections*

### Communal Religion vs. Creed Religion

As a creed religion Islam is based on a set of beliefs, which it claims embodies "the truth", and it is eager to attract new converts. These are all typical features of creed religions. As a communal religion, Shinto lacks all these features. However, neither religion is a pure example of its type. Islam began as an Arab communal religion (see below), and in Iran since the 16th century Islam has had certain communal features and has been the outward expression of Iranian national identity, differentiating it from its Turkish and Arab neighbours. Likewise, Shinto, which was between 1868 and 1945 the outward expression of Japanese nationalism, was stripped of that role by the American "Shinto Directive" of 1945. But it still remains at the heart of Japanese national and cultural identity.

### Violence: Islam

Islam and Shinto have both been accused of promoting violence. It is often said (among others by Pope Benedict XVI quoting a 14th-century Byzantine emperor) that Islam owed its rapid rise in the early days to conversion at the point of the sword.[308] It has now been convincingly shown by Ira Lapidus, Graham Fuller and Hamblin and Peterson that *"Islam didn't spread by the sword; the Arabs did."* (See under "Origins", above). The early Arab conquerors did not actually want to convert their conquered subjects to Islam, preferring to tax them instead. *"At the time of the conquest, Islam was meant to be a religion of the Arabs, a mark of caste unity and superiority. The Arabs had little missionary zeal. When conversions did occur, they were an embarrassment because they created status problems and led to claims for financial privileges."* How then did Islam change into the very evangelical religion that it is today? The first shift came with the overthrow of the Arab-oriented Umayyad dynasty by the more multi-ethnic Abbasid caliphate in 750 CE, although the concept of Arab superiority within Islam has still not disappeared altogether.[309]

Islam has also been blamed for recent atrocities committed by terrorist groups in the name of Islam, as for example in the oft-quoted remark by Richard Dawkins that "Islam [is the] greatest force for evil today."[310] However, Graham Fuller argues convincingly that *"[T]he present crisis of East–West relations, or between the West and 'Islam', has really very little to do with religion and everything to do with political and cultural frictions, interests, rivalries, and clashes*."[311]

One noteworthy feature in this regard is the tendency of Islam to take on features of a communal religion. As we have already seen, Iran only became Shia because Shah Ismail I (1487–1524) wanted to use a religious identity in his fight against the Sunni Ottomans — and gave his subjects the choice of conversion or death to achieve his objective. Now, five centuries later, we find militant Islamist groups like Boko Haram in West Africa and the self-styled "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL, ISIS or in Arabic, Da'ish) actually taking over territory by military means and, in the latter case, claiming to have set up a new *caliphate*, the term "caliph" (*khalifah*) meaning "successor", "deputy" or "representative" of the Prophet Mohammed. Al-Qaeda, of which ISIL is an offshoot, has long had the establishment of a caliphate as a goal, and its former leader, Osama bin Laden, is on record calling for Muslims to "establish the righteous caliphate of our umma".[312] The Arabic term *umma* or *ummah* means "nation" or "community", commonly used as an abbreviation for *ummat al-Islamiyah*, meaning "the Islamic Nation", referring to all Muslims throughout the world. Does this mean that for these jihadist movements Islam is now a communal religion? Not at all, because these communal elements have been grafted on to what is still very much a creed religion, with hostility not only towards other religions but also towards other Islamic denominations, coupled with a creed religion's missionary zeal to recruit new converts: ISIL evidently confronts their captives with the stark choice of either converting to the ISIL brand of Sunni Islam, or paying a tax known as *jizya*, or being killed. In ISIL's magazine, *Dabiq*, the "Official Spokesman for the Islamic State" boasts that Allah *"has healed the chests of the believers through the killing of the nusayriyyah and rafidah at your hands"* — the *rafidah* ("rejectors") evidently being the Shia, and the *nusayriyyah* being the Alawites, a Shi'ite group to which President Bashar al-Assad of Syria belongs.[313] Is this sort of thing sanctioned by the Koran?

Beheading, ISIL's favourite method of "execution", is mentioned in the Koran: *"I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Therefore strike off their heads and strike off every fingertip of them."*[314]

However, there also are verses enjoining toleration, but at the same time encouraging conversion to the "truth": *"Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error*."[315] And: *"Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve*."[316]

**Violence: Shinto**

Shinto was blamed by the US for Japanese militarism and ultra-nationalism leading to its involvement in World War II. Hence the so-called "Shinto Directive" of 1945 discussed above. However, this blame is undeserved, as a comparison with Germany will show. Can Nazi Germany's militarism and ultranationalism be blamed on religion, and, if so, which one? Hitler did try to bring the German Lutheran Church under state control in the so-called *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (German Protestant Church) under Reichsbischof Ludwig Müller, but that was done only after the Nazis' accession to power, and it proved in any case a dismal failure. The Roman Catholic Church signed a controversial Concordat with Germany in 1933, although this had been preceded by concordats with the individual German states of Bavaria (in 1925), Prussia (in 1929) and Baden (in 1932) during the Weimar Republic. Hitler, though brought up as an Austrian Catholic, became disillusioned with religion, and when in power allowed anti-church members of his government to conduct persecution of the churches.[317] This culminated in the barbaric "execution" of Dietrich Bonhoeffer just as the Nazi regime was collapsing in April 1945.[318] To regard Nazism as a secular religion and therefore still manage to blame religion is a bit far-fetched. In short, therefore, as German militarism and ultranationalism cannot be explained in terms of religion, neither can that of Japan.

**Contrast**

Here the contrast between a creed religion and a communal religion is particularly stark. Islam has extended toleration to

adherents of other religions but usually only on payment of a special tax as an alternative to conversion, and toleration does not usually amount to according non-Muslims equal rights to Muslims (see under “Toleration”, above). By contrast, since 1871 Shinto has not discriminated against adherents of other religions at all, and, as already noted, Japan has had no fewer than eight Christian Prime Ministers since 1918.

# *Review Of Chapter Seven*

- Islam is a creed religion, while Shinto is a communal religion.
- Each of the two religions largely conform to the classification to which it belongs, thus corroborating the communal/creed classification.
- *Beliefs*: Whereas Islam has a clear creed, which has to be accepted in order to be or become a Muslim, Shinto has only the vaguest of beliefs, which are in no sense a test of membership.
- *Claim of "Truth"*: Islam claims to be the only true religion, whereas Shinto makes no claim to truth.
- *Name*: Islam has a definite name, but the name "Shinto" means nothing to most Japanese people, 70% of whom profess no religious affiliation but 90% of whom nevertheless attend Shinto shrines.
- *Toleration*: Though often praised for toleration in the past (e.g. in Moorish Spain), Islam has never accorded non-believers, even the "Peoples of the Book" (i.e. Christians and Jews), equal rights to Muslims. There has also long been a major rift between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which has never been more bitter than at the present time. In Japan, by contrast, complete religious toleration has existed since 1871, and no fewer than eight Japanese Prime Ministers have been Christians.
- *Conversion*: In common with most other creed religions, Islam is a highly proselytising religion, and conversion is very quick and easy. Like most other communal religions, Shinto is not a proselytising religion and there is no mechanism for conversion to Shinto.
- *Violence*: Islam is associated with a lot of violence, and never more than at the present time, but Graham Fuller argues convincingly that this has less to do with religion than with *"political and cultural frictions, interests, rivalries, and clashes"*. As for Japan, the militarism and ultranationalism of the period

up to 1945 should probably not be blamed on Shinto.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *Conclusion*

The "New Atheists" and traditional organised religion are equally arrogant. Religious arrogance all too frequently manifests itself as intolerance or persecution of other religions or even of some denominations by other denominations of the same religion. Atheists tend to put the blame for all the evils in the world on religion and (with some notable exceptions) pin their hopes on man's ingenuity and prowess. But this naïve faith in humanity creates more problems than it solves. What is the solution? Communal religions tend to be more tolerant than creed religions, but the most tolerant and least arrogant position is belief in an *impersonal* God, accepted by some of the greatest minds of all time — possibly including Charles Darwin himself.

### Religion, Atheism & Arrogance

Organised religion and radical atheism are equally arrogant. By contrast with the meek atheists of the past, who challenged the bastions of established religion at their peril, the "New Atheists" of today are emboldened by the decline of traditional values in the West coupled with a naïve faith in mankind's own self-perceived power and ingenuity.

Here is a good example of the denigration of religion coupled with a naïve faith in science on the part of one of the most strident of the New Atheists: "*Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody… had the smallest idea what was going on*."[319]

The link between humanism and atheism is well illustrated by the "Atheist Bus Campaign" launched by the British Humanist Association in 2009, with this slogan on buses, first in London and then elsewhere in Britain and internationally: "THERE'S PROBABLY NO GOD. NOW STOP WORRYING AND ENJOY YOUR LIFE."[320]

In rejecting any kind of supernatural force, the new militant

atheism essentially places its faith in man as the be-all and end-all. There are a few notable exceptions to this. Richard Dawkins, to his credit, is opposed to "speciesism" in the sense of regarding animals, including primates, as expendable by comparison with "a single human zygote".[321] However, not surprisingly, this is used by Dawkins as a stick with which to beat the religious pro-life movement.

### Religious Arrogance

Organised religion is equally arrogant. While claiming to subordinate man to God, it actually does the opposite. We read in Genesis: *"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them*."[322] In fact, of course, it was man who created God in *his* image.

### The Arrogance of Creed Religions

Most *creed* religions — and most denominations within most creed religions — believe that they are superior to all other religions and denominations, that their creed embodies the "Truth" and acceptance of it vouchsafes to its adherents "salvation" and "everlasting life". Central Christian texts include the well-known, *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*."[323] In Islam, similarly, true believers who lead a righteous life are promised paradise.[324]

### Paradox

There is a paradox here. For, if your religion has a monopoly on truth and guarantees you eternal life, why should you want to share these benefits with outsiders? Yet, paradoxically, most creed religions are imbued with missionary zeal to proselytise and recruit converts — with intolerance, prejudice or even persecution reserved for those who refuse to see the light.

How is this paradox to be explained? There may be an altruistic motive for this — "true believers" wanting to share with others the bounty that they themselves enjoy. A more cynical, but possibly truer, explanation may be that proselytism or evangelism is a deliberate strategy employed by the leaders of creed religions to expand the size of their flocks and thereby their influence.

Christianity owes its very existence to Paul's missionary work all around the Roman world, and Islam's prominence as the second biggest faith in the world today is at least partly the result of conversion.

The success of the Mormons, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which now has about 15 million members, is attributable at least in part to the (generally) two-year full-time missionary work expected of all young male Mormons, more than 88,000 of whom are currently in service.[325] There must be few people in the West who have never been visited by Jehovah's Witnesses, who now number some 7.96 million, or who have not been approached on the street by someone distributing Watch Tower Society publications, which are available in no fewer than 700 languages. "Witnesses", as members are called, are expected to spend as much time as possible on spreading the word and are even required to submit a monthly "Field Service Report".[326]

**The Arrogance of Communal Religions**

By contrast, communal religions generally do not engage in missionary activities and may make it difficult for outsiders to convert. Judaism provides the best-known example of this position, but Hinduism and Shinto are also non-proselytising religions.

The reason for this is not hard to understand. Communal religions, as we saw in Chapter 4, do not have an identity distinct from that of the nation, state or community of which they are an integral part. It would be as unlikely for, say, a Hindu to convert to Shinto as for an Indian to become Japanese — which is indeed what would have to happen for the religious change to take place. Communal religions therefore tend to be tolerant of other religions.

Does this mean that the adherents of communal religions do not regard themselves as superior to others? Not at all. Jewish claims of superiority are well known. And, as we saw in Chapter 7, in the 1945 Shinto Directive or Bunce Directive issued by the Americans in Japan, the doctrine of Japanese superiority was specifically banned, although it was evidently not extinguished in practice.[327] These beliefs in a people's superiority may be dressed up in religious garb, but they are in reality simply an expression of nationalism.

### Two Types of Religious Arrogance

It is a form of communal arrogance, but with exactly the opposite effect from the arrogance of creed religions. While the arrogance of creed religions expresses itself in missionary zeal combined with intolerance of other religions, the arrogance of communal religions leads to toleration of other religions coupled with an exclusive and even unwelcoming attitude to prospective converts from those other religions.

### Default Religion?

There is some evidence to suggest that becoming a communal religion is, as it were, the default position for religion in general — in other words that the most natural position for a religion to adopt is as part of the identity of a nation or a community and for that religion to be the dominant, or even the sole, religion in that community. Despite the evidence in favour of this proposition, it also raises some problems.

Shia Islam in Iran is a modern example of a religion which, while remaining essentially a creed religion, has some features of a communal religion as well, deliberately introduced as it was by Shah Ismail I in the 16th century to give Iran a distinctive identity *vis-à-vis* the Sunni Ottoman Turks, and now serving also to distinguish Iran, a non-Arab nation, from its Arab neighbours as well as from the non-Arab Sunni Turks. What then about the Shia *Arabs*, particularly in Iraq, 60% to 70% of whose population is Shia? There was large-scale migration from Iran to what is now Iraq in the 16th century, and in the 18th and 19th centuries there were many converts from Sunni to Shia as a protest against their Sunni non-Arab Turkish rulers.[328]

A similar link between nationality and religion can be found in Europe. For example, it is no accident that the line-up in Northern Europe is:

- Northern Germany — Lutheran
- Poland — Roman Catholic
- Lithuania — Roman Catholic (pagan until 14th century)
- Latvia — Lutheran
- Russia — Eastern Orthodox

This is a form of checkerboard politics. Just as the squares on a checkerboard alternate black-white-black-white, so the geopolitical line-up of countries is based on the philosophy, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". The religious labels hide the national and political realities lurking beneath.

**Reversion to Communal Religion?**

But is this expression of nationalism in religious terms really a reversion to communal religion? Not quite. Because, as we have seen, communal religions, which were the norm in the ancient world, do not normally have a definite creed or set of beliefs, and as a result tend to be tolerant of other religions. So, for example, although a Roman citizen would undoubtedly regard himself as superior to a German or a Persian, it would not even occur to him to convert these foreigners to the Roman civic religion.

Christianity can never become a true communal religion, because even when closely identified with a national or political struggle, like that of the Northern Irish Nationalists or the Poles, it remains a creed religion with its usual intolerance of other religions coupled with a desire to bring members of those religions into the Christian fold. The same applies, for example, to Iranian Islam, where Shia Islam is something of a hybrid between a communal and a creed religion. It is an expression of Iranian nationalism but at the same time remains a creed religion with the usual creed religion features of intolerance plus missionary zeal.

Hybridisation of this kind between a communal and a creed religion is particularly poisonous in the case of Judaism, as was seen in Chapter 5, where a traditional communal religion has been overlaid with creed features, resulting in the development of the worst features of both: the exclusivity of a communal religion coupled with the intolerance and internal dissensions of a creed religion, without the creed advantage of attracting new converts to its ranks.

**The Rise and Decline of Toleration**

Although creed religions have an intrinsic tendency to be intolerant of other religions and indeed also of other denominations and groupings within themselves, it is undeniable that western Christianity has become more tolerant in the past century or so,

albeit evidently sometimes still through gritted teeth, as can be seen in the definition of "Religious Toleration" in the current online edition of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*: "*By religious toleration is understood the magnanimous indulgence which one shows towards a religion other than his own, accompanied by the moral determination to leave it and its adherents unmolested in private and public, although internally one views it with complete disapproval as a 'false faith'.*"[329] Despite the clear contempt and disdain evinced here towards other religions, this nevertheless reveals a much more tolerant attitude than would have been expressed before the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65. A similar relaxation in attitudes to other faiths has been detectable in Protestant churches over the past 150 years or so. How can this development be accounted for? Presumably largely in recognition of the decline in belief and in attendance at church resulting from liberalisation of attitudes in society at large. At the same time Islam has generally shown a decline in toleration, probably largely as a reflection of political and economic conflict with other Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In short, the degree of religious toleration in evidence in any creed religion at any time would appear to be a function of attitudes feeding in to religion from the broader political, social and economic background. The fond idea of religious liberals like Hans Küng expressed in the slogan "No Peace among Nations until Peace among the Religions" is probably back-to-front: a political settlement needs to come before a religious one. A similarly mistaken view has been publicised by the succession of meetings of the so-called "Parliament of the World's Religions", which has met periodically since 1893 without any tangible result.

**Man and Nature**

This brings us to that favourite pastime of deciding who to blame for all the evil in the world. The recent quantum leap in the development of science and technology has certainly been impressive. For thousands of years the fastest form of transport was horse-drawn, the only machines were powered by hand or foot, and the most advanced writing instrument was the quill pen. Then about two hundred years ago, with the advent of steam, technology started to develop. But even in 1900 the automobile was as yet in its infancy, the telephone was a novelty, electric lights an experiment and air travel a dream. A short century later and the

world (or at least the so-called developed world) was unrecognisable: everything was powered by electricity, international air travel was taken for granted and a new electronic technology based on the silicon chip had revolutionised everything from control of water mains to travel to telecommunications.

However, although man has landed on the moon and the boundaries of science have recently been expanded in different directions, such as by the discovery of the "Higgs boson", by the formulation of the hypothesis known as "M-theory" (an extension of "string theory") and by the Human Genome Project, cures have yet to be found for many serious diseases, and even the workings of the human brain are still only very imperfectly understood.

The "BRAIN Initiative" ("Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies", or the "Brain Activity Map Project") was announced by the United States Government in April 2013 in response to a need expressed by top-level researchers in these terms: "Understanding how the brain works is arguably one of the greatest scientific challenges of our time."[330]

The wonders of the universe — including that of the human body itself — were not created or even invented by human beings: they were all there from the beginning. What is remarkable is how long mankind took to "discover" these wonders. Electric currents and radio waves have been lurking in the ether for millions of years and yet they have only recently been harnessed by man. Even circulation of the blood in the human body, which ought to have been obvious at an early date, was only fully described by William Harvey less than 400 years ago.

Even the earth itself is still far less well understood than might have been expected. In the year 2014 the complete disappearance without trace of an airliner with 239 people on board gave pause to anyone who assumed that the task of locating so large an object could not possibly defeat human science and technology.

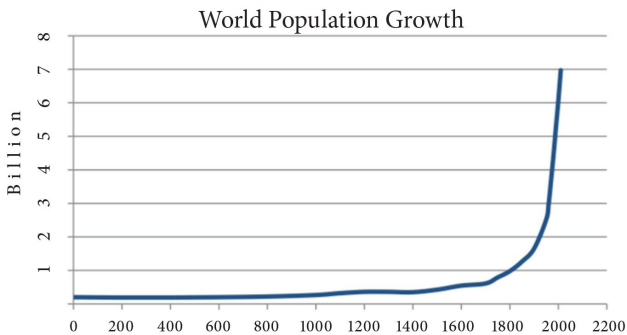
**Population Explosion**

Modern man's impact on nature has been much more negative than positive. The debate about climate change and global warming goes on unabated, but the preponderance of the evidence points to man's responsibility for this development. In 2013 the

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that: *"It is extremely likely (95–100%) that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century."*[331] The obvious answer is to reduce population growth by means of birth control, but, strangely enough, this possible solution is not even mentioned in the IPCC report.

In 2011 the world population for the first time reached 7 billion, having climbed to 6 billion in 1999, only 12 years earlier. Here are some relevant figures:[332]

| Billion | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Year | 1804 | 1927 | 1960 | 1974 | 1987 | 1999 | 2011 |




It took the whole of human history until 1804 (the Napoleonic era) to reach 1 billion. But the rate of growth soon picked up. It took 123 years to reach the second billion, 33 years to reach 3 billion, and since then the population has grown by a billion every 12 to 14 years. This is an exponential rate of growth.

The alarming increase in world population is sometimes blamed by atheists on religion, but the true culprit really is naïve humanism.[333] Conventional religion, notably the Roman Catholic Church, condemns not only abortion but also contraception (except for the so-called "rhythm method"). However, the Church's influence is clearly not as great in practice as is commonly assumed. For example, in Italy, a country in which 87.8% of the population identifies as Catholic, in May 2014 there was one birth every 1.1 minute and one death every 50.1 seconds, meaning that the population was only just managing to replace itself — including immigrants from the developing world whose birthrate was much

higher than that of the indigenous Catholic population. A similar pattern is found in Spain and Portugal, two other overwhelmingly Catholic countries.[334]

Religion can therefore hardly be blamed for the high birthrate in developing countries. This recent spurt in population is largely driven by population growth in the developing world. Well-meaning "humanist" western philanthropy (not necessarily associated with atheism) is far more to blame than religion for this third world overpopulation. By reducing infant mortality, HIV, malaria and polio this multi-million-dollar drive increases the population in countries that are already overpopulated, resulting in competition for scarce resources — including basic necessities such as rice, maize and water — which in turn manifests itself in civil strife, disorder and migration to the West, where the result tends to be an increase in crime and a threat to western values.

### Where Have All the Tigers Gone?

The tiger population has moved in exactly the opposite direction. In 1900 it is estimated that there were about 100,000 tigers in India alone. That figure is now down to about 1,700 — out of a total world tiger population of between 3,062 and 5,066. The reason for this drastic decline is the same as for all endangered species — namely, human rapacity, ignorance and greed, in the form of over-hunting, poaching, deforestation and climate change. There is now a roll-call of over 3,000 endangered animal species, not counting those that are already extinct.[335]

### Jainism

Does religion or atheism have anything to do with this inhumanity of man to beast? Only very indirectly. The major religions are just as humanity-centric as atheistic humanism. One religion which is an exception is Jainism, whose central tenet is non-violence towards all living things, whose members will literally never harm a fly, and which teaches the equality of all life forms. Jain monks wear gauze masks covering their mouths to prevent them from inadvertently swallowing any small flying insects.[336]

### Sacred Cow

However, the well-known Hindu reverence for cows has the

opposite effect from what was probably intended. As Hindus are not permitted to eat or slaughter cows, cattle are not as well cared for as in societies where they are bred for the table. As a result, there are constantly large numbers of emaciated cattle roaming around freely in the Indian countryside.

### Kosher Giraffe Meat?

Jewish and Islamic ritual slaughter, which was intended to allow the animal's blood to drain out, both in the interests of human hygiene and in order to minimise the animal's pain and suffering, is now under increasing attack in various European countries, where it is characterised as cruel and inhumane. Both Jewish kosher slaughter and the similar but less strict Islamic halal form of ritual slaughter were banned in Denmark in February 2014 on the ground that *"Animal welfare takes precedence over religion*", in the words of Denmark's ministry of religion. The comment made by Andrew Brown in the *Guardian* is apt: *"It seems to me obvious that the slaughter of animals at the end of their lives is of far less ethical importance than the way they are treated beforehand. The cruelties of factory farming extend over an animal's whole lifetime whereas the cruelty of ritual slaughter lasts minutes at most. To complain about the halal slaughter of battery chickens or factory farmed veal is a truly monstrous absurdity.*"[337] The hypocrisy of Denmark's ban on ritual slaughter is all the more striking when Copenhagen Zoo could at the same time shoot a perfectly healthy 18-month-old giraffe, known as Marius, and feed his carcass to the lions, merely because of a risk of inbreeding — all done in the face of an international petition with more than 27,000 signatures and offers from several zoos in other countries to give Marius a new home.[338]

### Man's Inhumanity to Man

So much for man's inhumanity to beast, but what about man's inhumanity to man? The 20th century ushered in the two bloodiest wars of all time and the 21st century has already witnessed numerous wars and internecine conflict, resulting in major carnage in certain parts of the world. The ideal of brotherly love is as far from reality as ever.

What lies at the heart of all this hostility, enmity and conflict? The New Atheists put the blame squarely on the shoulders of

organised religion, and there can be no doubt that religion does indeed bear some responsibility for violence arising out of intolerance and persecution. However, in many cases where conflict is expressed in religious terms the true causes of the conflict are much more deep-seated political, racial or economic factors. The religious labels used in such conflicts only serve to exacerbate the underlying bitterness and to justify both sides' determination to continue the fight, which is then likely to be seen in moral terms.

The protracted hostility between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland is an example of a religious or "sectarian" conflict whose roots can be traced to factors other than religion — to a colonial "planter" situation and to ethnic conflict. When King Henry VIII repudiated papal authority in the 1530s and turned the Church of England Protestant, he tried to introduce a similar Reformation in Ireland. But this did not work. Why? Because the indigenous Celtic population of Ireland clung to their Roman Catholic faith as a symbol of resistance against English domination. This was exacerbated when the government injected into Ireland thousands of English and Scottish settlers who happened to be Protestant. The stage was now set for centuries of conflict between the indigenous population and the "planters". The leading 19th century Irish nationalist leader was Charles Parnell, a Protestant. And, as we saw in Chapter 1, the Northern Ireland "troubles" were essentially political rather than religious, as is shown by the fact that they were (effectively) brought to an end by means of a political settlement. The conflict was often expressed in religious terms but was essentially political.

**Middle East Conflicts: Religious or Political?**

Even the harrowing apparently religious conflicts in today's Middle East may in reality be political. Even the Sunni-Shia conflict itself may be essentially political, because, as we have seen, the reason why Iran is Shia is actually political, not religious. The protracted civil war in Syria does indeed look religiously based, with President Assad being an Alawite (a branch of Shia) while his opponents are mostly Sunni. But what can be said about the relationships between the Sunni (non-Arab) Turks, the Sunni (non-Arab) Kurds, the Sunni Saudi Government, the Sunni Egyptian Government, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, the Sunni Hamas, the

Sunni al-Qaeda, the Sunni al-Nusra Front, the Sunni al-Quds Brigades, the Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan, the Sunni Boko Haram, the Sunni Al-Shabaab, and the Sunni self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant known as ISIS or ISIL? Some of these organisations are allied or affiliated to one another, but others are either in an uneasy or even adversarial relationship towards one another.

The Kurds (an Iranian people) do not have a state of their own but occupy an area known as Kurdistan, which straddles four countries, one of which is Turkey, where the PKK, or Kurdistan Workers' Party, fought an armed struggle against the Turkish state from 1984 to 2013 for Kurdish self-determination. At the time of writing the PKK is still designated a terrorist organisation by Turkey (and NATO), though they have a common enemy in ISIL, a Sunni Arab organisation which has captured part of Iraq and proclaims as its aim the establishment of a new caliphate, or a theocratic Islamic monarchy covering the whole of the Levant. In short, therefore, to blame all the conflicts in the Middle East on religion is both unfair and also less likely to lead to a solution. In addition, to impose western "politically correct" values on Islamic societies will only cause offence or even hostility.

**Toppling God?**

But, even if they were to accept this, the New Atheists would still be as determined as ever to topple God from his pedestal. The next question is whether religion or atheism can offer a better explanation for the beginnings of things. It is important to keep the three main stages in the development of the universe (condensed from seven) separate, which the atheists do not always do. The three stages are:

- *The beginning of the universe, including the earth*: The leading contender here is the "Big Bang" theory espoused by atheists but also enthusiastically embraced by religious leaders starting with Pope Pius XII. As a something-from- nothing theory it has scientific and evidential problems and also logical ones. Stephen Hawking's explanation that *"Because there is a law like gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing*" is at best question-begging. (See Chapter 2.) The simplest and best explanation is to attribute the making of the universe to a super-intelligent God — the impersonal God of deism, not the

personal theist God of conventional religion. (See Chapter 3.)

- *The origin of life*: The emergence of a single-celled living organism from non-living matter. There is a welter of weird and wonderful explanations for this stage embraced by atheists (and others), but none of these theories has any real evidence to support it. Once again, therefore, God comes to the rescue as the simplest, most elegant and neatest explanation — but again the impersonal God of deism rather than the personal God of conventional religion. (See Chapter 3.)
- *Variations and changes in living organisms*: There is general agreement among scientists that all life forms have descended from a common ancestor, so that bacteria, bananas and baboons are all related to one another and to man. But evolution by natural selection needs more than just the existence of life to kick-start it into operation. And there are some serious disagreements about the way it operates once it does. Could that be a call for the impersonal deist God again? Moreover, it also now turns out that the chief mechanism of evolution is not natural selection but random genetic drift. See Chapter 3 for this and on the major spat between Dawkins and the celebrated Harvard biologist, E.O. Wilson, who denies Dawkins the title of scientist and dismisses him instead as an "eloquent science journalist".

**Deism Not Weighed Down by Baggage**

All in all, therefore, deism has a better claim of credibility than either theism or atheism. Atheism has the weaknesses indicated above, while theism has a lot of baggage which weighs its credibility down, such as belief in a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, receptive to prayer, who doles out reward and punishment, performs miracles and is involved in day-to-day life.

Further baggage weighing theism down in the case of Christianity is the clutch of claims made for Jesus, none of which will stand up to scrutiny. For example, the virgin birth; the Bethlehem story; the claim of Davidic descent; and the claim to be the Jewish Messiah in fulfilment of Biblical prophecies — not to mention the Trinity. (See Chapter 6.)

The impersonal God of deism by contrast is not weighed down by any baggage, but is generally seen simply as the creator of the universe and of natural laws, belief in whom depends not on revelation or on a leap of faith but simply on reason and observation of the natural world. Deism is easy to accept, offers the best all-round solution to the relevant problems, is more tolerant and less arrogant than either theism or the New Atheism, and has been accepted by some of the greatest minds of all time, including Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson, Mark Twain, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein — and possibly even Charles Darwin himself.

# *Summary Of Conclusions*

- The New Atheists blame religion for all the evil in the world.
- Although religion is far from irreproachable, it is a mistake to blame religion for all conflicts that are fought in its name. The long-running and bloody conflict in Northern Ireland is a case in point, which was eventually settled by political means, leading to the curious spectacle of the erstwhile foes Rev. Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness becoming the "Chuckle Brothers".
- There are two types of God that one may believe in, a *personal* God and an *impersonal* God. Belief in a personal God is termed *theism,* while belief in an impersonal God is called *deism*. A personal God is one who is omnipotent, omniscient, receptive to prayer, who doles out rewards and punishments, performs miracles and is involved in day-to-day life. By contrast, the impersonal God of deism is seen as the creator of the universe and of the laws of nature but without any involvement in the day-to-day affairs of the world.
- In their onslaught against belief in God, the New Atheists tend to ignore deism or just lump it in with theism. Deism is an embarrassment to the New Atheists, because it is impregnable against most of the attacks made against theism.
- There are also two types of religions: *communal* religions and *creed* religions.
- Creed religions like Christianity and Islam are centred on a creed or set of beliefs, which promises their adherents "salvation" and "everlasting life". Creed religions tend to be intolerant of other religions and also of other denominations and groupings within their own religion, and they tend to be imbued with missionary zeal to win converts.
- Communal religions, which were the norm in the ancient world, are non-proselytising or even unwelcoming to prospective converts but tend to be tolerant towards other

religions and towards other denominations within their own religion.[339]

- Creed religions have an inherent tendency to intolerance of other religions and of other denominations and groupings within their own religion, coupled with missionary zeal to attract new recruits, while communal religions tend to be more tolerant but uninterested in attracting new converts.
- Deists are the most tolerant of all, and generally do not belong to any formal religious organisation.
- There are essentially three (condensed from seven) main stages in the development of the universe. *The beginning of the universe, including the earth*: the "Big Bang" is popular, but it is question-begging. Stephen Hawking attributes it to the law of gravity, but where did *that* come from? The simplest and best explanation is God — but not the personal God of theism with all his baggage: the impersonal God of deism.
- *The origin of life*: None of the weird and wonderful explanations embraced by atheists has any real evidence to support it. Once again, therefore, the impersonal God of deism comes to the rescue as the simplest, most elegant and neatest explanation.
- *Changes and variations in living organisms*: Natural selection needs more than just the existence of life to kick-start it into operation. Could that be a call for the impersonal deist God again? Natural selection isn't the only mechanism of evolution. It also turns out that the chief mechanism of evolution is not natural selection but random genetic drift. And there is a major spat between Dawkins and E.O. Wilson, who denies Dawkins the title of "scientist" and dismisses him instead as an "eloquent science journalist".

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Michael Arnheim (or "Doctor Mike" as he is commonly known) is a practising London Barrister and Sometime Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge.

This is his sixteenth published book to date. His previously published books include *Is Christianity True?*, *The Handbook of Human Rights Law*, *The Senatorial Aristocracy in the Later Roman Empire*, *Aristocracy in Greek Society*, *Principles of the Common Law* and *The US Constitution for Dummies*.

Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, Michael Arnheim studied Latin, Greek and Hebrew from an early age. At the age of 13 he became a member of the "Quiz Kids" team of five capped and gowned teenagers who were something of a national institution on South Africa's Springbok Radio. Entering Johannesburg's Witwatersrand University at the age of 16, he took a first-class BA in History, Latin and Greek at the age of 19, first-class Honours at 20 and an MA with distinction at the age of 21.

He then went up to St John's College, Cambridge, on a scholarship, where he was awarded a PhD in record time on a wide-ranging dissertation on late Roman history, which was published by the Oxford University Press. He was subsequently elected a Fellow of St John's College, where he continued to do research and teach Classics, especially Ancient History.

At the age of 31 he was appointed a full Professor and Head of the Department of Classics back at his old university in South Africa. After some years in that position he returned to Britain, where he was called to the Bar by Lincoln's Inn in 1988 and continues to practise as a London Barrister.

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The retrieval date for all websites referred to in the text should be taken as 23 November 2014.

Note: All sources in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and German were consulted in the original.

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257. Matthew 1:17.
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